ESSENTIALISM AND FEMINIST THEOLOGIES: SOME PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS

by

FRANCES MARIE GRAY

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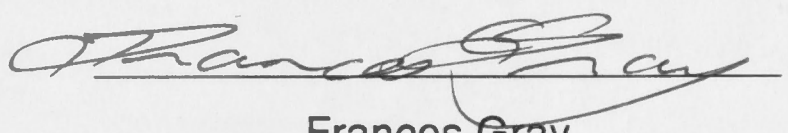
DECLARATION

Except where otherwise indicated,
this thesis is my original work.



Frances Gray

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Dedication

To my mother, Alexandrina Galloway Hunter

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These have been four very difficult years. Thank you Timothy, Alister and Madeleine for hanging in there. You can have me back now. And thank you Lynton.

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a philosophical interpretation of the way in which the idea of essentialism is contested in feminist theologies. It explores the relationship between women's experience, which theologians such as Mary Daly and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza hold is foundational to feminist theologies, and concepts of the Divine. I agree with the rejection of essentialist concepts of women, thus the notion that 'woman' has a fixed meaning across history and in all cultural and socio-political contexts. However, I also challenge the way in which essentialism and social constructionism have been cast as alternative and mutually exclusive theories.

The polarity between essentialism and social constructionism, I argue, has its origins in John Locke's work. Locke's theory that essence is related to language practice, and should be thought of as nominal essence, is a forerunner of the concept of social construction as it is used today. The debate about essentialism in feminist theory has appropriated Locke's distinction between real and nominal essence and provided a theoretical underpinning for an analysis of the idea of woman. I argue, following Diana Fuss and Elizabeth Grosz, that the polarity between real and nominal essence is contentious and reinscribes dualistic thinking.

Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza reject real essentialism. However, they operate within complex dualistic frameworks which separate language and reality and which they simultaneously disavow. Daly's account relies on privileging language to such an extent that it carries the burden of responsibility in constituting 'reality' and the Divine in so far as the Divine mirrors women's experience. If it can be argued that the Divine is the mirror of women and women are socially constructed, then the Divine mirrors socially constructed women. I argue that one interpretation of the relation between women's experience and the Divine can be derived from Feuerbachian projection theory.

In my view, Daly's ontological-linguistic strategy implies that an 'independently real' body underlies language. I argue that Daly accepts that there is a 'natural' body. Schüssler Fiorenza also employs projection theory, but her elucidation is tempered by her belief that G*d is not constituted by discursive practice. I maintain that in repudiating naturalism and privileging discursive practice as she does, Schüssler Fiorenza posits

reality both in terms of that which is within language, and that which is separable from language (G*d). Her interpretation of the idea of reality is therefore disquietingly ambiguous.

Such conceptualisations are untenable because they do not account for female embodiment. This is a perplexing omission from their feminist theologies. Without some account of embodiment, feminist theologies valorise conceptions of women's experience which continue to be dualistic. In each case, discourse is ontologically privileged in order to avoid courting essentialist constructions of women's experience. I argue that the idea of divinity which is commensurate with women's experience(s) implies both that women construct, and are concurrently constructed by, their embodiment and language. Therefore, an account of female embodiment is imperative for the successful elucidation of feminist theologies.

As an alternative to their dualistic accounts, I explore the work of French philosopher/psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, who has been branded an essentialist. She offers a different model which does not rely on the purported separability of language and 'reality'. Her work is of particular interest because she claims that women need a Divine of their own. She proposes refiguring divinity in terms which exploit the male symbolic and 'the feminine' as 'it' is interpreted within that symbolic. I argue that her notion, the sensible transcendent, can be used as an interpretative device for some conceptions of social constructionism. I also argue that her use of the sensible transcendent as that which transgresses dualistic conceptions implicit in feminist theologies, provides a way of thinking about these issues which neither depends on essentialist assumptions, nor assumptions about language conceived of as independent of 'reality'. Most importantly, female embodiment is an explicit part of her articulation of the Divine.

Frances Gray
Department of Philosophy
The Faculties
Australian National University
Canberra ACT
Australia, 0200

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF FEMINIST THEOLOGIES[1]

It is accepted by many feminist theologians that there is a strong relation between men's conceptions of themselves and their conceptions of God and what they value most highly. Mary Daly and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza are among the feminist theologians who hold this view. They argue that as theology has been the domain of men, the God postulated by men reflects male assumptions, male socio-politics and male theorising. In Christian theology, for example, the Nicene Creed, the Creed of orthodoxy of the Christian Church, proclaims:

> We believe in One God, the Father Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth
> Creator of all things visible and invisible;
> And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only, begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all time . . . [2]

Not only does God become embodied as a man, this God-made-man is begotten from a Father from eternity, pre-existing his mother. The girl-woman Mary becomes his

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[1] There are two points to note here. Firstly, I use the expression 'theologies' rather than 'theology' throughout this thesis to acknowledge the variety of positions and theories found in works of different feminist theologians, thealogians and feminists interested in the Divine. For a sample of this diversity see Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" and "Introduction: Womanspirit Rising" , in Carol P. Christ & Judith Plaskow (eds.), Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1979); Carol P. Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest (Beacon Press, Boston, 1980) ; Judith Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich (University Press of America, Lanham MD, 1980) ; Naomi Goldenberg, Returning Words to Flesh: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Resurrection of the Body (Beacon Press, Boston MA, 1990); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation (Beacon Press, Boston, 1992); the collection Judith Plaskow & Carol P. Christ (eds.), Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1989); Anne Pattel-Gray, "Not Yet Tiddas: An Aboriginal Womanist Critique of Australian Church Feminism" in Maryanne Confoy, Dorothy A. Lee, and Joan Nowotny, Freedom and Entrapment: Women Thinking Theology (Dove Publications, Melbourne, 1995).

Secondly, all of these feminists refer to, imply, or use, the idea of women's experience(s), the idea with which I am concerned in this thesis, as fundamental to the development of feminist theologies. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology (SCM Press, London, 1983); Rebecca S . Chopp, "Feminism's Theological Pragmatics: A Social Naturalism of Women's Experience" in Journal of Religious Studies, 67 (2) (1987), pp. 239 - 256.

[2] John Leith (ed.), "The Constantinopolitan Creed", in Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present (rev. ed.) (John Knox Press, Richmond VA, 1973). p. 33.

mother but as an instrument who consents to the Father's intentions and in so doing becomes the model for all women. ("You see before you the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said." [3]) In Trinitarian theology, this masculine-paternal God is self-subsistent, the original single parent, who substantially remains one while manifesting himself as three (male) persons: Father, Son and Spirit.

Feminists theologians have interrogated the notion of a 'male' gendered God because they regard the 'male' gendering of God as inappropriate. Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza, amongst others, have attempted to dislodge the 'maleness' of the transcendent divinity, claiming His genesis in the socio-political and metaphysical machinations of men.[4] This God, they argue, is a product of androcentric understandings, interpretations and symbolics which are taken as normative and disregard the experiences of women.[5] This God, many feminist theologians have claimed, is the God of men and not the God of women.

Given that feminist theologians read theology and conceptions of divinity as male gendered, women's experience, not men's, has become enormously important to them. They argue that women's experience is negated and neglected in conceptualisations of divinity, resulting in a politics which oppresses and undervalues women.[6] So, in what is undoubtedly the most fundamental intervention of feminist theologians, women's experience has been highlighted as the key category for articulating feminist theologies. This has meant that feminist theologians have openly questioned the images and language associated with the idea of God and what it means to be a woman. In interrogating the concept of women, the idea of God has become destabilised and so a connection between women and divinity has been posited. Theorists like Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza have used both religious and secular theory in the development of

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[3] Luke 1:38, The New Jerusalem Bible, (Doubleday, New York, 1985).

[4] See for example, Sally McFague, The Body of God: An Ecological Theology (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993).

[5] See for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (SCM Press, London, 1983), pp. 58-60.

[6] See for example, Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex (with a new Feminist Post Christian Introduction by the Author) (Harper & Row, New York, 1975); op. cit., Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk.

their own theologies. Not withstanding the influence of theologians like Daly, secular theory has undoubtedly had a strong influence on feminist theologies, resulting in the blurring of the distinction between the worldly and the religious. In part, this blurring could be seen as an attempt to overcome the supposedly binary oppositional nature of the secular and the religious.[7] American feminist theologian Carol Christ for example writes:

> I do not intend to separate reality into the spiritual and the mundane, as has been typical in Western philosophy. . . . I believe women's quest seeks a wholeness that unites the dualisms of spirit and body, rational and irrational, nature and freedom, spiritual and social, life and death. . . . I believe that women's spiritual and social quests are two dimensions of a single struggle . . .[8]

Sentiments like those of Christ could be used, in part, to explain the disillusion with theology of feminist theologian Daphne Hampson. Hampson has written:

> What strikes me then about much modern theology - and this is not least true of feminist theology - is how profoundly secular it is. It is as though theology has lost its moorings. In the case of feminist theology, what seems to have replaced talk of God is largely talk of women's experience. It is not even women's experience of God it is simply women's experience. Thus Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza tells of the community of women in the early church, celebrating their courage in adversity and their egalitarian politics. . . Mary Daly advocates the self realisation of women and the overcoming of oppression in a new age. . . . In all this, what I miss is 'theology': talk of God.[9]

Hampson's comments are echoed by Luce Irigaray's remark that "sociology quickly bores me when I'm expecting the divine".[10] This is an interesting twist because the point seems to be that the theological, once conceived in terms of transcendent and the

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[7] Elizabeth Grosz [formerly 'Gross'] reads binarism in terms of setting up two categories, one of which is privileged over, and opposed to, the Other. In Cartesian metaphysics, for example, mind and body are two terms which form a binary opposition. Mind is privileged over body and the two terms are seen as oppositional: either body or mind, but not both. Hence, body and mind are separable substances which co-exist at opposite ends of an imagined schema. I use, and defer to Grosz's characterisation of dualism throughout this thesis. See Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism (Allen & Unwin, St. Leonard's, 1994), pp. 3 - 10.

[8] op. cit., Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing, pp. 8 & 9.

[9] Daphne Hampson, Theology and Feminism, Signposts in Theology Series (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, UK & Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. 170.

[10] Luce Irigaray, "Equal To Whom?", in Naomi Schor, & Elizabeth Weed (eds.) The Essential Difference, Books from Differences Series (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994), p. 80.

'other worldly', now takes on the characteristics of the secular: immanent, and firmly grounded in human experience.[11] This also might explain Irigaray's ennui: feminist religious sociology or at least socio-politics which reflects immanence, the world at large and the world of women which denies them transcendence. In feminist theologies this translates as the articulation of women's experience, as if women's experience holds some clue to the Divine which men's experience does not. A consequence of valorising the importance of women's experience, then, is that talk of transcendence is devalued in favour of talk of immanence. But a further consequence is that the problems associated with the relation and tension between transcendence and immanence are revisited. As well as this, the unsettling question of embodiment, conceived of in terms of immanence, emerges.

Let me stay with the idea of women's experience as immanent. The assumption of feminist theologians has been that women's experience ought to inform theology. Therefore, acceptance of the representations of women's experience as immanent potentially forces a refiguring of the Divine which not only devalorises the idea of transcendence but problematises embodiment as well. The quandary with the idea of embodiment is that feminists have claimed that women's embodiment provides the site for essentialising discourses about what it means to be a woman. This means that images of the Divine which come out of women's experience are very much embedded in the concerns of **embodied** women: maternity in particular. But how such concerns are to be theorised is contentious because the spectre of essentialism looms large. By this I mean that one of the difficulties facing feminist theologians and feminist theorists in general is how to talk about biology and female bodies without courting essentialist assumptions. This latter is precisely why Schüssler Fiorenza, as we shall see in chapter

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[11] The tension between immanence and transcendence has a long philosophical and theological history. The Hebrew Scriptures have *Yahweh* present (he gives Moses the Tablets on which is written the Law) and operating in the history of the Hebrew people while being the Other which men cannot see and survive. The theme of God's presence in the world, and His difference from the world, survives in Aquinas' Proofs for God's existence, to Spinoza's Ethics, up to current discussions such as Elizabeth A. Johnson's in She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (Crossroad, New York, 1993), Ch. 6, pp. 104 - 120; and Frank Burch Brown's "Theology's Dialogue with Culture" in Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden, Companion Encyclopedia of Theology (Routledge, London & New York, 1995), pp.325 - 326. For philosophical treatment of transcendence in the work of de Beauvoir, see Karen Green, "Femininity and Transcendence", in Australian Feminist Studies, 10 (Summer 1989), pp. 85 - 96.

3, is so aggrieved at the operation of normative concepts (for example the maternal feminine) relating to women. It is also why women need to develop some understandings of what they mean when they talk about 'women'. It seems paradoxical that some feminist theorists might talk about women's experience without talking about female embodiment for fear of essentialism. The trope of the body is suppressed in favour of the trope of social construction because embodiment is invariably associated with ideas of essentialism.

One of my major concerns in this thesis, is to argue that a good version of social constructionism would allow talk of embodiment without being essentialist. I will not be questioning the assumption that women need to develop their own account of the Divine. My concern is to characterise what one might mean by the term 'woman' and then to explore its relation to the Divine. This is because the assumption that women's experience should be the foundation for feminist theologies suggests a moment when masculine paternal figurings of the Divine must be problematised and reformulated in terms more amenable to women.

In contrast to Schüssler Fiorenza's denunciation of the maternal feminine, I argue in my final chapter that Luce Irigaray's idea of the sensible transcendent[12] preserves the transcendent and associates it with the immanent in an interdependent relation. Irigaray's own account of the Divine is not sociological, although it takes cognisance of social factors. She articulates divinity in a formulation which 'combines' two ambiguous expressions, the transcendent (discourse) and the immanent (embodiment). But for now the questions which need to be asked are, What does women's experience say about the Divine? and What is meant by 'women's experience'?

However spelt out, that women's experience in relation to the Divine has its origins in men's theology is undeniable. Men's theology has provided the content of theological belief and determined how women ought to behave if they are to be pleasing to God. The girl-woman Mary, with her unquestioning assent to the Angel's request has provided the model of womanhood to which all women ought aspire.

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[12] Many commentators and translators prefer 'transcendental' rather than 'transcendent' in translating Irigaray's term "*transcendental sensible*". See Luce Irigaray "Éthique de la Différence Sexuelle" in Éthique de la Différence Sexuelle (Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1984), p. 124. I prefer 'transcendent' to avoid associating the term with Kant's transcendental.

But the proposition that **human** experience and the Divine are linked is not new to philosophy and theology, even if it is expressed in terms of the implicitly inclusive generic 'Man'. Xenophanes proposed:

> But mortals think that the gods are born,
> and have clothes and speech like their own.
> But if cows and horses or lions had hands
> or could draw with their hands and make the things men make,
> then horses would draw the forms of gods like horses,
> cows like cows, and they would make their bodies
> similar in shape to those which each had themselves. [13]

Yet Plato in the Theaetetus offers what might be thought of as a 'reverse' projection theory in which men should aim to model themselves on the Divine:

> Socr. [sic] Evils, Theodorus, can never be done away with , for the good must always have its contrary; nor have they any place in the divine world; but they must needs haunt this region of our mortal nature. That is why we should make all speed to take flight from this world to the other; and that means becoming like the divine as far as we can, and that again is to become righteous with the help of wisdom.[14]

Instead of the Divine being imaged as man would ideally image himself, Plato's idea seems rather that man should strive towards modelling himself after the perfection of the Divine. I will argue later that Schüssler Fiorenza employs both of these projectionist perspectives in the development of her idea of ekklesia. Feuerbach, in developing his anthropological theology claimed that God is the mirror of man.[15] As with Xenophanes, Feuerbach's 'God' becomes the projection of the best of all human qualities. The idea of God is dependent upon the existence of human consciousness.

Reviewing an essay by Amy Hollywood, Nancy Frankenberry observes that "Among other things, she signals the complex ambiguities that attend the Feuerbachian

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[13] "Xenophanes" in Jonathon Barnes (trans. & ed.), Early Greek Philosophy (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1987), p. 95.

[14] "Theaetetus" in Francis Macdonald Cornford (trans. & commentary), Plato's Theory of Knowledge (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, New York, 1935), 179c - 186e.

[15] Feuerbach develops this mirror/projection theory at length. See Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity (trans. Marian Evans) (John Chapman, London, 1854), p. 62, and in particular, "The True or Anthropological Essence of Religion", Part 1, ch. 11, but his claims are clearly set out throughout his book.

gesture of viewing religion as nothing but an alienated projection of creative human potential. This is especially important in the light of the conspicuous reliance of many feminist critiques on Feuerbachian projection theories".[16] We will see that this formulation of God/the Divine is echoed by Daly's, Schüssler Fiorenza's and Irigaray's complex theorising of the Divine, albeit in different ways. For Feuerbach, there is nothing 'independent' and 'objectively real' about God thought of as separable from human consciousness.

At this stage it is important to emphasise that feminist theologians have not rejected talk of a 'male' God because God might be perceived as a projection *per se*. They do not argue that God does not exist because God might be a projection of (idealised) Man. Their moves are more subtle, arguing instead that God should also be conceived of in such a way as to reflect women's experiences.[17] It could be argued then that the feminist enterprise has in part been to replace the 'God is the mirror of man' discourse with 'God is the mirror of woman'. Irigaray, for example, reads Feuerbach literally and refuses to admit that the Divine projected by man can be a God for women. 'Man', on this reading is not to be thought of as a generic term. Quite literally men project their own images - sexed and situated in their own experiences - to constitute the kind of God they would like themselves to be. Irigaray has argued that women need their own Divine because women need a projection of what is ideal for women, morally and psychologically. On Irigaray's argument, given the differences between women and men, the Divine of women and the Divine of men will be different.

Like Irigaray, Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza acknowledge the importance of destabilising androcentric discourse in the development of feminist theory. Discourse, language in use, as we shall see, is a very important aspect of feminist theologies, just as it has been in men's theology where the Word is paramount.

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[16] Nancy Frankenberry, "Introduction: Prolegomenon to Future Feminist Philosophies of Religions" in Hypatia. Special Issue: "Feminist Philosophy of Religion" [Nancy Frankenberry & Marilyn Thie (eds.)] 9 (4) (Fall 1994), pp. 1 - 14. See that volume also for Amy M . Hollywood, "Beauvoir, Irigaray, and the Mystical" , pp. 158 - 185.

[17] See, for example, Catherine La Cugna (ed.), Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective (Harper, San Francisco, 1993).

If the undertaking has been for women to displace, subvert and ultimately replace masculinist discourse, then Hampson's comments could be read as a too hasty appraisal: talk about God/the Divine is talk about women's experience. On this view, one's experience as woman (or man) is the very ground of theological understanding. 'Experience' and the idea of the Divine are not separable. One might ask of Hampson, 'Is it possible to talk about God without talking about experiences of either women and men (or both)? What kind of God is one positing if one believes that experience is not a primary category in the articulation of theology?'

On the other hand, it is odd to think that feminist theologians should devote so much time to developing feminist theory which can be read as merely sociology - or psychology - as Irigaray suggests. I have argued that this is a result of devalorising the idea of the transcendent and opting instead for the immanence of women's experience. That, at least, seems to be implied in both Irigaray's and Hampson's comments: that to speak of the Divine in terms of women's experience is to delimit the idea of the Divine as a transcendent concept.

Two problems should be highlighted here: firstly, the semantic one to which I referred earlier, which interrogates the meaning of women's experience; and secondly, the idea of experience as a fundamental category for theology. In turn, these two questions suggest others which are relevant for feminist theologies: Just what is the relation between God and women's experience? If women make a Divine in their own image, does that not gender God as masculinist theology has and does? What precisely does one mean by 'God', 'the Divine'?

In a preliminary response to this last question recall a distinction made by Pascal between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.[18] Pascal's distinction between the (masculine) paternal God and how 'God' functions in philosophical and theological systems might be usefully employed in a discussion of women's experience and theology. In the context of women's experience Christian

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[18] Kevin Hart, The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK & Sydney, 1989), p. 29. Hart is discussing the work of Derrida and points out that "Derrida is more concerned with the former than the latter. It is not that Derrida addresses himself to a being that is posited rather than to a Father who is trusted, but that he is concerned with how God has been made to function in philosophical and theological systems".

feminist theologians for example, appear to be concerned primarily with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their worries revolve around the issues of God's gender, God's Fatherhood, God's relation to women and the socio-political implications of such issues.[19] In other words, theirs are existential concerns relating to the object of one's belief, for example to bring about a just and liberated society. The work of Schüssler Fiorenza focuses on socio-politics to this end.

But there are also concerns about the God of the philosophers, the God/the Divine to whom/which Irigaray and Hampson allude. The way in which 'God' has been made to function in philosophical and theological systems, many feminists would argue, is anathema to women because in these systems everything is conceived of as a unified whole.[20] This means that recognition of difference: sex/gender, class, race has been eradicated or has never been acknowledged, in an attempt to privilege one view of the world (male, white, European, middle class) which reflects an ultimate and objective truth. In this scheme, woman as subject has been ignored or silenced and man as subject has been taken to be normative. Thus the whole of theology has revealed itself through the eyes of a particular privileged class of men as true for all.

Feminist theologians such as Schüssler Fiorenza and Elizabeth Johnson have addressed what we might think of as the functional usage of 'God',[21] existentially. In so doing, they have eroded the boundaries between the God of belief and faith and the God of the philosophers. An account of being in terms of God/the Divine refigured from an existentially informed woman-centred perspective, dominates feminist theologies.[22] Such

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[19] See, for example, op. cit. Daly, The Church and the Second Sex; op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said.

[20] See op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said; Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Experience in White Feminist Theory", in Sex, Race and God: Christian Feminisms in Black and White (Crossroad, New York, 1989) ; and bell hooks, feminist theory from margin to center (South End Press, Boston, 1987).

[21] See Schüssler Fiorenza's use of 'G-d' and 'G*d', in op. cit., But She Said and op. cit., Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology (Continuum, New York, 1994) , and op. cit., Johnson, She Who Is.

[22] This is so especially in the case of Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (The Women's Press, London, 1979), and Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy (The Women's Press, London, 1984) , and Carol Christ's work on the Goddess "Why Women Need the Goddess", in op. cit., Christ and Plaskow, Womanspirit Rising.

an account always invokes the notion of women's experience and accentuates the importance of what Pascal called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. One might infer from this that the task of feminist theologians in articulating women's experience is to address the problems associated with theorising the paternal God. Note that this can be thought of as another example of feminist theologians' attempts to disavow distinctions which are taken for granted in the orthodox canon. On this reading, Pascal's distinction is not one that feminist theologians would want to maintain. If the God of the philosophers is anything they might argue, He is a God of Reason, the God of Men. And it is this God they seek to repudiate. So in concentrating on existential concerns, feminist theologians in effect disavow the God of the philosophers as a product of Reason.

The feminist insistence on women's experience as a fundamental category for feminist theologies would seem, then, to be justified. It serves the dual function of inserting women's experience into articulations of the Divine and breaking down the distinction between the God of faith and the God of Reason.

However, as I noted above, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is a God of experience, the experience of men. Tradition has it that this God is also the God of women because 'men' should be read generically and therefore includes 'women'. Herein lies the problem. If the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the God of men's experience what does it mean to say that this God is also the God of women's experience when the term 'men' should not be read generically according to feminist theory?[23] Why should 'men's experience' be read inclusively especially when the experience(s) of men and the experience(s) of women would not seem to be co-extensive. What would it mean to say that this God is the God of both women and men?

So far I have argued **not** that feminist theologians deny the existence of a relation between experience and concepts of the Divine, but that women's experience is missing from (what is largely) men's theological conceptualising. A major problem in any theoretical stance which posits a close, and perhaps inextricable, relation between experience, theology and the Divine - and without exploring that relation - is the semantic question of what meaning one can give to the expression 'experience'. As many feminists

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[23] See any of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's works where she discusses this problem very well.

have pointed out, all subjects are gendered. On their view, supposedly neutral theory, which assumes a supposedly neutral subject, is 'male' theory which operates at the level of the suppressed idea of a 'male' subject. Women are automatically included in men's theorising.[24] Not only is there a problem with working out what is meant by 'experience' and 'its' various relations, but the idea of '**women's** experience' as it relates to theology and conceptions of the Divine, needs some attention.

'Women's experience' is not a carefully elucidated term. Its lack of clarity revolves around questions like: Which women do you mean when you speak of 'women's experience'? Do all women experience the same, have the same experiences? If they do what is the basis for their similarities? If they do not, what are the differences? If women experience differently, can one ever legitimately use the expression, 'women's experience' universally (speaking for all women everywhere)? What rôle does experience play with respect to women? Do women in some sense, pre-exist their experiences, so that women **have** experiences? Or are women created or constructed as a result of, or constituted by, their experiences? How is one to view the relation between women's experience(s) and the Divine when the last two questions might yield very different answers? What is meant by 'God'/'the Divine'? Is divinity separable or distinct from any human experiences, women's or men's?[25]

Such questions warn that the problematic of women's experience might be something of a three dimensional jigsaw puzzle in which putting together the top layer does not insure the solving of the rest of the puzzle. Grappling with problems like these, American feminist historian Joan Scott argues:

> History has been largely a foundationalist discourse. By this I mean that its explanations seem to be unthinkable if they do not take for granted some primary premises, categories, or presumptions. These foundations (however varied, whatever they are at a particular moment) are

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[24] See, for example, op. cit., Daly, Gyn/Ecology; and Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One (trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke) (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1985).

[25] For a good review of feminist conceptions of 'woman' see Rosemarie Tong, Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction (Routledge, London, 1993).

> unquestioned and unquestionable; they are considered permanent and transcendent.[26]

Scott points out that experience is what is in need of explanation, and is not what ought to be counted as the source of our explanations.[27] According to her, there is danger in thinking of experience as something which is had by autonomous agents. Rather than reifying experience, making experience into an object or thing of which a subject, the agent, is the origin, Scott suggests that experience should be thought of as that which constructs, not that which is constructed by an agent. This would mean that ideas like that of autonomous agency in which a subject pre-exists her experience, should be re-read so as to give prominence to the rôles culture and language play in the making of subject positions: as woman and/or worker and/or homosexual and/or black. That is to say, the appearance of there being autonomous agency emerges as a result of experience, rather than autonomous agency being its pre-condition.

Now if it is the case that women's experience should be explained rather than that which does the explaining, perhaps it might also be the case that women's experience engenders, or constructs a unique women's understanding of the Divine. This Feuerbach inspired thesis is a strong one: that as women are constructed through their experiences, so might the Divine, insofar as divinity is the mirror of women. The complexity of the idea of women's experience is testament to the complexity of the idea of divinity. Divinity is not disembodied and abstracted from women's lives. Divinity for women reflects their sexed embodiment, their incompleteness and their becoming, their possibilities. In their attempts to refigure their negatively figured status, women's difference from men and from each other necessitates a Divine constructed differently. Thus how one characterises the Divine will not be closed, but will be constructed around difference(s), possibilities and ideals.

Scott's suggestion picks up on a debate which has become very important to feminist theorising: the question of essentialism (that there is something timeless, universal and unchanging which makes a woman a woman) and social constructionism

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[26] Joan Scott, "Experience", in Judith P. Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds.), Feminist Theorise the Political (Routledge, New York, 1992), p. 26.

[27] ibid., p. 38.

(that women are for example, cultural productions or artifacts[28], who are constituted by various socio-cultural and political discursive practices and positionings). On these two accounts, women either have experiences or are the result of experiences. If experience constructs (woman), if experience is to be explained and is not that to which one can appeal in speaking about women, then the question of women's experience is thrown wide open. 'Woman'/'women' speaks to social practices and accordingly can have many meanings. Those meanings should be seen within the complexities of social practice which individuate women and constitute their differences from men. On this account, because women, are constructed through their experiences, women will be constructed differently. This will mean that the ground of feminist theologies is not women's experience, but women's **experiences**. Women's experiences produce **women**, not '**woman**'. The universal term fails to refer because there is no universal woman to whom one can refer except in terms of an idealised projection, which feminist theologians and feminists generally, reject as untenable. On such an account not only are women different from men, but they are different from each other.

As women are different, their differences constituted through diverse cultures, ethnic, race, sex/gender and class factors, it follows that the use of women's experiences as foundational in feminist theologies, should reflect that diversity. However, if it is the case that women are constituted by their experiences, is one obliged to abandon universal ascriptions like 'All Australian women are of the female sex because they have two x chromosomes', or 'All women can bear children'? These are after all, questions about female bodies, the bodies of women. How is one to account for female embodiment if women are socially constructed? Supposing that one does give an account of female embodiment which is consonant with the idea that women are socially constructed, how will that be reflected in women's conceptualising the Divine? Should the concept of the Divine mirror women's bodies for example? What would it mean to make a claim such as that?

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[28] See for example Rosi Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy (trans. Elizabeth Guild) (Polity Press, Oxford, 1991) ; op. cit., Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies; Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (Routledge, London & New York, 1990).

Given these questions, a shift in understanding must take place if one is seriously to countenance women's experience as foundational to feminist theologies. It seems that there might be competing claims about women as constructed, the rôle of embodiment and how that might relate to the social construction of women. The argument would be that if it is unacceptable to think of experience as a consequence of subject positioning rather than as constituting that positioning, and if the idea of women's experience is retained as a foundational discourse for feminist theologies, this social constructionist perspective not only presents one with a reinterpretation of 'experience', but of 'woman' as well. But women are embodied and this 'fact' should be taken into consideration when one develops one's account of a Divine for women. If one acknowledges that women are embodied, what does this acknowledgement do for a feminist concept of the Divine? Is one committed to an essentialist stance if one acknowledges women's embodiment and if that is so, how is one to conceive of divinity in relation to the idea of an essential women? Can one claim that women are embodied and at the same time argue that women are socially constructed? If one makes a claim like the latter, what kinds of things can be said about women, their experiences and their relation to the Divine? In this thesis I attempt to come to terms with these apparently competing claims.

The problem is that the two apparently competing views (essentialism and social constructionism) offer two different understandings of women's experience ('universalisable/essential woman' and 'socially constructed women') while retaining the centrality and foundational nature of experience. The competing views can be summed up in the phrase 'essentialist debate'. Put simply, the debate revolves around whether or not there is something timeless, universal and unchanging which makes a woman a woman. The opposing view, that women are discursively produced through cultural and other socio-political factors, says that there is nothing timeless, universal and unchanging about women. Discourse, not a timeless essence, is responsible for constituting women. Since discourse constitutes the idea of women and women's experience is the ground for feminist theologies, one might think that discourse and the object of feminist theologies - the Divine - are linked.

I have been arguing that this is the case if the Divine is construed as the mirror of women. One might argue that there is nothing essential (in the sense in which I am

using the term) about the Divine either, that the Divine mirrors the best projections of society/culture just as Feuerbach suggested. The idea that God/the Divine stands outside time, ahistorical, and immutable is false: there is no essential God, just as there is no essential woman. On this reading, the idea of God/the Divine and the idea of woman is closely linked in a mirrored projection constituted by social construction. Given that feminist theologians opt for social constructionist over essentialist stances, I will argue that they must subscribe to some version of this thesis. But what is really meant when one uses the terms 'essentialist' and 'social constructionist'?

The term 'essentialist' and its cognates is widely used and often with limited understanding; likewise with 'social constructionist' - the meaning of which is often taken to be transparent. In this thesis, I am concerned to elucidate essentialism and social constructionism by addressing the essentialist debate in the context of feminist theologies. I will be addressing a number of problems which raise concerns about other philosophical issues like particulars and universals, realism and dualism, language and 'reality'. The language of feminist theologies develops whilst using these contested concepts. Hence one repeatedly finds references to 'woman' as an apparently universal term and the rôle language plays in the construction of 'reality' which is a social constructionist perspective. This is especially true of Mary Daly's and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's work.

It is not clear that one should immediately accept the social constructionist stance. While it is the case that feminist theologians have repeatedly argued that women are socially constructed, a passionate debate about essentialism has developed in the feminist academy. American feminist theologian Mary Daly, who was amongst the first to contend that women are tied culturally to their socio-political and cultural contexts,[29] seems in her later writings, to use what many regard as essentialising notions of woman.[30] Irigaray has been accused of adopting an essentialist stance because of her deliberate use of 'feminine' imagery and her apparent valorising of the feminine as 'it' has

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[29] op. cit., Daly, The Church and the Second Sex, *passim*.

[30] See for example, op. cit., Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance and op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 106.

been traditionally conceived.[31] I will argue that it is not clear that either Daly or Irigaray is essentialist, in a pejorative sense, even though they use language which Schüssler Fiorenza argues revalorises the maternal feminine.[32]

I will argue that social constructionism offers a way of thinking about women which acknowledges that they are constituted by their experiences. I will also argue that social constructionism might provide some ways of thinking about the Divine as that which mirrors women's experience(s). But I will also insist that women's embodiment must be taken into consideration when one attempts to theorise women and that this is an important aspect of women's experience in relation to the Divine. My argument takes seriously the feminist theological insight that women's experience should be foundational for feminist theologies. As I will show, the idea of essentialism is regarded as pernicious by most feminist theorists, secular or religious. As well, I will show that social constructionism has its pitfalls and should be courted tentatively.

Outline of Argument

The recent work of secular feminist theorists in the area of social constructionism has been very influential in determining the direction of feminist theologies, particularly as there has been a shift towards adopting non-essentialist, social constructionist stances. Following Teresa de Lauretis and Diana Fuss, I argue that in John Locke's work we find an interpretation of essence which is critical to feminist discussions of essentialism. In feminist theory generally what Locke called 'real essence' (that is not language dependent), is thought of pejoratively. But Locke opposes 'real essence' to 'nominal essence'. This opposition is echoed in the current feminist debate about essence. As Fuss points out, the idea of nominal essence can be roughly mapped onto the theoretical category, 'social construction' which maintains the primary rôle of discourse in the construction of women.

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[31] See Toril Moi, "Patriarchal reflections: Luce Irigaray's looking glass" , in Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (Routledge, London, 1991), pp. 127-147; Monique Plaza,' "Phallomorphic Power" and the Psychology of "woman"' in Ideology and Consciousness, 4 (Autumn 1978), pp. 5 - 35 ; and op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said.

[32] op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, "Justa" , in But She Said, *passim*.

The relationship between nominalism and social constructionism is highlighted by the work of secular feminist theorists like de Lauretis[33] and Fuss[34] who have developed strong critiques of a commitment to real essence. They attack real essentialist concepts of women on the grounds of their purported ahistoricism, universalism and immutability. In a similar vein, the American philosopher Elizabeth Spelman uses a critique of Plato and Aristotle[35] to challenge real essentialist notions of 'woman' which abstract gender from race and class considerations. Just as class and race factors did not sufficiently contribute to the understanding of woman in Aristotelian philosophy, so this is the case in today's feminist theories. For Spelman, 'woman' is a socio-political rather than a 'pure' sex/gender term and category.

Such claims against real essence are analogous to feminist historian Joan Scott's reconstructing experience as that which needs to be explained rather than that which can explain.[36] Rather than reifying experience, making experience into an object or thing of which a subject, the agent, is the origin, Scott suggests that experience should be thought of as that which constructs not that which is constructed by an agent. This would mean that ideas like that of autonomous agency in which a subject pre-exists her experience, should be re-read so as to give prominence to the rôles culture and language play in the making of subject positions. The rôle of discourse in the construction of women rather than the rôle of a non-linguistic substance, is brought to the foreground in such an account.

Language is an important factor in social constructionist theory because such theory asserts that discourse plays an originary rôle in the construction of women.

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[33] Teresa de Lauretis, "The Essence of a Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain" in differences, A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies. The Essential Difference: Another Look at Essentialism, (Summer, 1989), pp. 10 - 37. Revised and reprinted in Schor, Naomi & Weed, Elizabeth (eds.) in The Essential Difference, Books from Differences Series (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994).

[34] Diana Fuss, Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference (Routledge, New York & London, 1989) *passim*.

[35] Elizabeth V. Spelman, Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought (Beacon Press, Boston, 1988).

[36] op. cit., Scott, "Experience" in op. cit., Butler and Scott (eds.), Feminists Theorize the Political, p. 26.

Whereas essentialism posits a 'reality' independent of language which discourse describes and articulates, social constructionism "insists that essence itself a historical construction".[37]

These considerations bring into sharp focus the problematic nature of using the notion of women's experience as foundational for feminist theologies. 'Women's experience' is a contested category because the two notions of 'women' and 'experience' are themselves contested. In this context, the question 'Can one ever speak of women as women without concurrently speaking of race and class?' implies the substantive issue of how to articulate a general concept of women which does not suppress the differences amongst them. If Spelman is correct in her critique of the concept of woman, then the notion of women's experience will be always qualified by race/class and other factors. Hence 'women's experience' as foundational for feminist theologies walks on shaky ground if one thinks in universalising terms. The idea that one could be speaking to and for all women everywhere becomes problematic and has ramifications for feminist theologies, like Rosemary Radford Ruether's, which have relied on the idea of sex/gender as their primary analytic category.

Following Scott's reformulation of experience and Spelman's critique of the idea of women, it becomes unacceptable to think of experience as a consequence of subject positioning rather than as constituting that positioning. I argue that if the idea of women's experience is to be retained as a foundational discourse for feminist theologies, the social constructionist perspective not only confronts one with the necessity to reinterpret the concept 'woman's experience', but the concept of the Divine as well in a feminist theological context.

On this view, as women are different, of diverse cultures, ethnic, race, sex/gender and class contexts, it follows that the concept of women's experiences as foundational in feminist theologies should reflect that diversity. The implicit recognition of diversity is an important moment in feminist theologies, so one cannot eliminate the idea of women's experience as foundational. The consequence of such pluralism suggests the difficult question 'How is one to conceive the relation between feminist theologies, whose

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[37] op. cit., Fuss, Essentially Speaking, p. 2.

foundation is a pluralistic relativism, and divinity?' Thus one sees the need for a feminist theology which can accommodate a pluralistic relativism in its politics of reshaping divinity.

A version of social constructionism as that which constitutes women is implicitly recognised in the theologies of Mary Daly and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Yet they use women's experience as a foundation to a woman centred understanding of divinity in which they espouse "Feuerbachian projection theory".[38] Since both Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza accept that women are discursively constructed, I propose that in their work there is an intimate relation between social construction, language and divinity. Their desire to emphasise the rôle of language in the construction of our concepts of the real for instance, means that what counts as the 'reality' of God must itself be socially constructed. Their feminist enterprise has been in part to replace the Feuerbachian 'God is the mirror of man' with 'God is the mirror of woman' discourse .

But the importance of Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza is that they accept uncritically the concept of social constructionism. What does it mean to say that women are socially constructed? And if one argues that women are socially constructed, how does this avoid the problem of essence? I argue that in Daly's and Schüssler Fiorenza's cases, social constructionism is not necessarily a solution to essentialism because they both operate with a notion of 'real independent of language' which they simultaneously seek to repudiate.

For example, let us consider the points in Schüssler Fiorenza's work when she argues that "physical sex characteristics are not "biological facts" but are also discursively constructed. Anatomical physical differences are as discursively constructed and socially maintained as are cultural sex differences".[39] Schüssler Fiorenza argues that "access to reality is always mediated through language" and that feminist theory does not "excuse us from giving a more adequate account of reality, an account that does not deny or repress the historical activity of the subordinated "others."[40] Schüssler Fiorenza clearly

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[38] op. cit., Frankenberry, "Introduction: Prolegomenon to Future Feminist Philosophies of Religions" , p. 11.

[39] op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child , p. 40.

[40] op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza , But She Said, p. 91.

wants to argue that there is no brute nature, no brute biology and that nature and biology are always already in language. However, what is she maintaining when she also argues that we have access to a 'reality' that is always mediated through language and when she appeals to the idea of giving a more adequate account of 'reality'? I suggest that here Schüssler Fiorenza reifies the very category she wants to deny.

This example shows us that by evoking the idea of social constructionism, we do not necessarily avoid the problems of essentialism, a point made by both Diana Fuss[41] and Elizabeth Grosz.[42] On this basis, I argue that we should discard the opposition between social constructionism and essentialism. As Grosz argues, it is a false opposition.[43] Such a move is appropriate in a feminist theology which seeks to avoid dualistic thinking generally. How can one do this?

Luce Irigaray's work offers an example of someone whom we could describe as a social constructionist and who offers a concept of divinity which reflects women's experience and which does not incur the theoretical problems associated with essentialism. Irigaray does not oppose herself to essentialism, and as Margaret Whitford has pointed out, this is not an issue in her work. I argue that Irigaray refigures divinity in terms more appropriate to women's experience. Irigaray's idea of divinity does not submerge the differences among women, is not ahistoric, universalising and immutable and does not collapse into an essentialist account of women's experiences. According to Irigaray, the development of a feminine Divine and a feminine symbolic are necessarily implicated with each other. Representations of women's experience(s) through a unique feminine symbolic proceeds from formulating a feminine Divine. Quoting Feuerbach's "God is the mirror of man", Irigaray alleges that woman need a Divine of their own so that they can become women and not be represented as the lacking Other to men.

Irigaray's view of divinity as the sensible transcendent (or the integration of the immanent and the transcendent) does not postulate a 'reality' external to language to which language more or less has access. For Irigaray, talk about bodies is not

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41 op. cit., Fuss, Essentially Speaking, p. 6.

42 op. cit., Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies, p. 17.

43 ibid.

contentious, because she never appeals to 'real bodies' outside language. The idea of the sensible transcendent reflects women's experiences without essentialising. It also reflects women's differences without submerging them in a theoretical framework that implies essentialist categories.

Irigaray's idea of the sensible transcendent implies the possibility of difference from the very start. Hers is a feminist politics of divinity in which essentialism is not a spectre,[44] because she does not acknowledge the opposition of essence and language. Rather, in seeking to proceed from a concept of divinity which is a condition of women having a positive projection of themselves, she challenges women's atrophied status which has been visited upon them as the Other to men. The challenge to this atrophied status represents the possibility of founding feminist theologies on women's experience without collapsing into essentialism.

In reading Irigaray in this way, I offer an interpretational framework for understanding her commitment to a feminine Divine which many of her commentators have found difficult to understand. But I also offer a way of understanding the feminist desire for a theology which can embody the ideas of women's experiences and differences without appealing to alienating oppositional categories.

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[44] These issues are talked about by Penelope Deutscher , in '"The Only Diabolical Thing About Women . . .": Luce Irigaray on Divinity', in Hypatia, Special Issue: "Feminist Philosophy of Religion" [Nancy Frankenberry & Marilyn Thie (eds.)] 9 (4) (Fall 1994), pp. 88 - 111.

CHAPTER 1

ESSENTIALISM AND FEMINIST THEOLOGIES: FUNDAMENTALS

Introduction: The Problem of Essentialism

A foundational question with which many feminists have concerned themselves in recent debate surrounds the problem of Woman/women's essence.[1] The Essential Difference,[2] a collection of critical essays which explores a range of essentialist positions and debates across primarily feminist literature, is a fine example of the interests of feminists in essentialism. Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis[3] also includes essays on "the bearing of essentialism on feminist politics".[4] Essentialism has been the worry of religious and secular feminists alike, because the idea of ascribing essence to women involves the assumption that all women are the same across time, cultures and race. Essentialism should be seen within the wider context of the philosophical debate which had, for centuries, surrounded the notion of essence and its relation to and involvement with substance. The underlying problems which this debate had been addressing pertained to ontology. For example: What is it that makes a thing what it is? Are there innate qualities or properties and relations, or are these determined by social practice and convention? With respect to human beings, are humans born human, or do they become human through a process of socialisation? What does it mean to be human? What is the relation between the body, being human, and the mind? What are the criteria for saying that this thing is the same as it was yesterday? Is everything in a state of flux, or is there an unchanging, underlying substance? Should one speak of the One or the Many? And

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1 Whenever I use the term 'Woman' I refer to the universal. In order to refer to individual women, groups of women or individual women, I use lower case 'w'.

2 Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (eds.), The Essential Difference, Books from Differences Series (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994).

3 Brennan, Teresa (ed.) Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis (Routledge, London & New York, 1989).

4 ibid., p. 1.

epistemological questions: How do we know that this thing exists and is the same as it was yesterday?

Questions analogous to these are frequently asked by feminists in relation to women. What is (it that makes a woman) a woman? What is the relation between the universal term 'Woman' and individual women? Is it innate qualities, properties and relations that 'make' a woman or are there extrinsic or external factors that are involved? What is the relation between being a woman and having a certain kind of (sexed) body? Is women's experience unique? Can we actually speak of women's experience or should we always speak of women's **experiences**, thus acknowledging diversity and difference? My assumption here is that the essentialist problem echoes much older philosophical speculation and exploration and can be understood as part of that tradition.

What is the origin of what is known as the essentialist debate and what currency does essentialism have now? And why is it important to feminist theologies? Let me begin by suggesting that one can trace the debate about essence at least to Aristotle, who discussed at length essence and substance and their relation to universals and particulars.[5] Essentialism, although covering a range of positions as Naomi Schor points out,[6] in its most naive form posits an essence, something which makes a thing what it is, and without which that thing would not be what it is. In this Aristotelian sense, essence is reified.[7] Intrinsic natural essence is real, that in virtue of which x is what it is, as Charlotte Witt points out:

> If you ask the question, "What is Socrates?" the answer "a human being" leads directly to the Aristotelian notion of essence, for an essence is a nonlinguistic correlate of the definition of the entity in question. Specify what a human being is and you have specified Socrates' essence. On this interpretation, since Socrates and Plato are members of the same

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5 Aristotle, Basic Works (ed. Richard McKeon) (Random House, New York, 1941), "Metaphysics" *passim,* but see especially Book VII, 1029b ff.

6 Naomi Schor, "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray", in op. cit., Schor & Weed, The Essential Difference, p. 43.

7 See Aristotle, Metaphysics (trans. John H. McMahon) (Prometheus Books, New York, 1991), 1058a and 1058b; op. cit., McKeon Aristotle, Basic Works, Book VII, 1029b.

species, they share an essence that is also shared by all other human beings.[8]

On this account "what you are by your very nature is your essence".[9] Secondly, essence is also what a thing is not: being good is not to be bad, being white is not to be black. "So that if the essence of good is not good, neither is the essence of reality real, nor the unity of essence one."[10] The Aristotelian account of essence does not attribute any essence specific to women. This means that women do not have their own essence peculiar to being a woman, a theme which is taken up by Luce Irigaray.[11] The essence of a woman is her being human, but she is of a lower order than man, as we shall see. In Aristotle's account of women, women are regarded as a deformity of men. The term 'woman' picks out a sub-class of human beings and privileges another sub-class, 'man', over her. That women are defined in opposition to men in the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, as we shall also see, aligns a view of women's essence to this second meaning: to be a woman is to be associated with a range of negative attributes defined against a range of positive attributes which are attributed to men. In other words, the essence of a woman is not to have an essence. Woman's essence is lack: she has an atrophied status in relation to man.

For many feminists, however, lack of essence is not regarded as the central problem for women. Mary Daly, for instance, argues that given certain readings of Aristotelian texts, an inferior essence has been assigned to women. The supposed immutability, ahistoricity and universality of a feminine essence have meant that women

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8 Charlotte Witt, Substance and Essence in Aristotle: An Interpretation of Metaphysics, VII - IX (Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY & London, 1989), pp. 2 & 3. Witt points out that there are other versions of essence, but the notion of *species essence* is a common thread running through all of them. The quotation in full reads: "The most striking fact about individual substances such as Socrates and Bucephalus is that they are members of natural kinds or species (in this case different species). Socrates is a human being and Bucephalus is a horse".

9 op. cit., McKeon, "Metaphysics", Book VII, 1029b.

10 ibid., 1031b.

11 See Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One (trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke) (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1985); and Speculum Of The Other Woman (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1992).

have been characterised in ways that condemn them to subservience and powerlessness.

Such a characterisation of women has very negative implications for the notion of women's experience. If it is the case that women have intrinsic, natural essence, then that essence must determine in some way, what woman's experience will be like. And if 'it' is intrinsic, then all women will have that essence; 'it' can be used definitionally and should be true for all time.

I noted in my Introduction that Joan Scott rejects a foundationalist approach such as this. Instead, she opts for an account of experience which constitutes women rather than an account in which women have experience which they construct from their pre-formed subjectivities. If women have the kind of essence I have been describing, then experience will be constructed through the essence, or the essential properties, of women. Scott's social constructionist, and the essentialist stances, are two apparently oppositional and irreconcilable views, as I have already remarked. But what are the specific concerns which feminist theorists have about essentialism?

The research of feminist theorists in this area is illuminating. Their work has been very influential in determining the course of feminist theologies, particularly as there has been a persistent shift towards adopting non-essentialist, social constructionist stances. Of course the influence of feminist theologians like Mary Daly who was one of the first to denounce essentialism, cannot be gainsaid.[12] The specifics of the current debate, however, have been much more clearly spelt out by feminist theorists who are not so concerned with theological issues. The essential difference, to which I referred in my opening remarks, illustrates this very clearly. However, a useful reference is also Luce Irigaray's article "Equal to Whom?" a review of In Memory of Her, by the feminist theologian, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. The fact that such an essay appears in a 'secular' collection underscores the widespread nature of the essentialist debate.

What feminists in general have taken exception to should be made clear: that there is some difficulty with how one is to understand terms like 'Woman'/'women' and the relationship between their use(s) and meaning(s). Elizabeth Grosz's concluding paper,

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[12] See Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex (with a new Feminist Post Christian Introduction by the Author) (Harper & Row, New York, 1975).

"A note on essentialism and difference", in Feminist Knowledge, Critique and Construct,[13] lucidly testifies to the difficulties associated with essence and essentialism. Grosz comments:

> Feminists have developed a range of terms and criteria of intellectual assessment over the last twenty years or so which aim to affirm, consolidate, and explain the political goals and ambitions of feminist struggles. These terms have tended to act as unquestioned values and as intellectual guidelines in assessing both male-dominated and feminist-oriented theories. Among the most frequent and powerful of these terms are those centered around the question of the *nature* of women (and men) - essentialism, biologism, naturalism and universalism. . . . These terms are commonly used in patriarchal discourses to justify women's social subordination and their secondary position relative to men in patriarchal society.[14]

Grosz does not explore the origins of essentialism (nor is it her intention to do so). But she does capture the peculiarities of essentialism when she remarks that essentialism "refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions which limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganisation".[15] Essentialism is, then, questionable for feminists **at least** because of the unenviable and uncomfortable position in which it, in terms of definition, seems to place women and the consequences which seem to follow.

It might be the case that essentialising terms are used in the way in which Grosz indicates, but the question 'Do they have to be?',[16] is one with which I shall be concerned in part. It is arguable that essentialist terms are pejorative only if one regards them as more than descriptive and maintains that certain normative practices, rules or laws follow from them. That is to say, if one argues that there are some essential facts about women's bodies which imply certain moral sentiments ('women are a source of sin'), or evaluative judgements ('women are mathematically challenged'), then one is making

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[13] Elizabeth Grosz, "A Concluding Note on Essentialism" in Sneja Gunew (ed.) Feminist Knowledge, Critique and Construct (Routledge, London & New York, 1990), p. 332 ff.

[14] ibid., p. 333. See also Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism (Allen & Unwin, St. Leonard's, 1994), p. 212, endnote 15.

[15] ibid., p. 334.

[16] I thank Paul Thom for pointing this out.

claims which need substantiation. 'Facts' about bodies: that they have ovaries, or that brains are bigger/smaller in differently sexed bodies, are linked to behaviour as if there were a necessary connection between the two (the bearers of ovaries are very emotional or smaller brained human persons cannot think logically). The link between these 'facts' and the behaviour to which they purportedly give rise, needs to be elaborated if we are to accept that such links do indeed exist. Further, that there might be such 'facts' which are themselves not socially constructed, is problematic. Hence there is a debate amongst feminists regarding the nature of 'gross' or 'brute' facts. It is not just a case of agreeing that there is a Woman's essence and then arguing over how this fact is to be interpreted. Rather what is contested is that there is Woman's essence in the first place.

The question of what makes a woman a woman and what the answer(s) might imply, is therefore crucial to developing feminist theologies. That is because women have been subjugated, demeaned, undervalued and suppressed because of perceptions which relate to their reproductive functions which are given theological significance. The rôle of mothering, for example, has developed from perceptions about child birth and nurturing which have been glorified in Catholic Canon. Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been proclaimed a model for all women, **the** model of motherhood.

Two things need to be noted here: that the supposedly necessary consequences of adopting essentialist assumptions might be arbitrary; and that the initial presuppositions that lead to the supposedly necessary consequences are contested. In this chapter I will explore some of the issues which arise from particular assumptions, interpretations and understandings of essentialism and its origins because such an exploration will provide a deeper understanding of the problems surrounding women's experience in feminist theologies. My assumption is that essentialism is deeply implicated in feminist theologies and the representation of women in its theory. For example, it has been suggested by Schüssler Fiorenza, Toril Moi and others, that Mary Daly's idea of women is posited on a universal, archaic, feminine essence which women need to rediscover. This essence is assumed to be 'real', the non linguistic correlate of a thing's definition, as Witt suggested. But the essence which does not appear to be non-linguistic or independent of language, is also examined by some feminist thinkers like Teresa de Lauretis and Diana Fuss. This essence which is thought of as nominal essence and

depends upon the use of language, is viewed as contingent and changeable. The idea of nominal essence is very often what subtends social constructionist perspectives. The term 'nominal essence' is taken from John Locke, to whom de Lauretis and Fuss appeal for clarification of essence and its relation to feminist theory. So I begin with a short discussion of their work.

John Locke and Nominal Essence

Both Teresa de Lauretis and Diana Fuss are American feminist theorists who have written about real and nominal essence. In this section, I will be exploring some of the issues they raise about the nature of essentialism and essence and its problematic for feminist theory. In doing this, I indicate that many of the issues they raise are pertinent to feminist theologies in their dependence upon women's experience as their foundation.

Each writer uses John Locke's distinction between real and nominal essence as an explanatory tool for developing an understanding of what feminists' concerns with essence are. As a preliminary understanding one can, roughly speaking, think of Locke's idea of real essence as the underlying (but fictional, according to him) 'reality' of something: it is what makes something what it is. Nominal essence, on the other hand, is discursively constructed: language in use as it classifies and labels.[17] Both de Lauretis and Fuss seize on this distinction to argue cases for social constructionism against essentialism. Their positions, however, do not mirror each other. Indeed, their readings of essentialism indicate substantial cognitive differences.

De Lauretis has three main concerns in her paper, "The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain".[18] The first is to clear up misunderstandings about the meaning of the words

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[17] For a good discussion of Locke's analysis of essence, see Roger Woolhouse, "Locke's Theory of Knowledge", in Chappell, Vere (ed.) The Cambridge Companion to Locke (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), pp. 146 - 171.

[18] Teresa de Lauretis, "The Essence of a Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain" in differences, A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies. The Essential Difference: Another Look at Essentialism, (Summer 1989), pp. 10 - 37. Revised and reprinted in Schor, Naomi & Weed, Elizabeth (eds.) in The Essential Difference, Books from Differences Series (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994). [References are to the original article in differences unless otherwise indicated.]

'essentialism' and 'essence'. In doing this, de Lauretis hopes "to shift the focus of the debate from "feminist essentialism" as a category by which to classify feminists or feminisms, to the historical specificity, the essential difference of the feminist theory itself".[19] By stating this, de Lauretis is sign posting what she understands as unique in feminist theory, *viz.* its specific emphasis on the cultural, sociological and historical in the construction of feminist theory **as** women's concern.[20]

De Lauretis' second concern is to lay bare the shortcomings of feminist works by Chris Weedon[21] and Linda Alcoff[22]; and the third is to give an account of current Italian feminist theory [within the appropriate framework of historical contextualising (historical specificity)].

De Lauretis begins by stating that the term 'essentialism' "covers a range of metacritical meanings and strategic uses that go the very short distance from convenient label to buzz word".[23] Her main point is not that it has such a range of meanings, nor that its use has deteriorated to mere buzz word, but that its meaning is problematic. Guided by her intuition 'that either too much or too little is made of "essentialism"',[24] de Lauretis consults the Oxford English Dictionary for suitable, useful definitions.

The dictionary definitions she finds most intellectually compelling are:

> a. of a conceptual entity: The totality of the properties, constituent elements, etc., without which it would cease to be the same thing: the indispensable and necessary attributes of a thing as opposed to those it may have or not . . .
>
> b. of a real entity: Objective character, intrinsic nature as a 'thing-in-itself': that internal constitution, on which all the sensible properties depend.[25]

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19 ibid., p. 12.

20 ibid., p. 11.

21 Chris Weedon, Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987).

22 Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory", Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 13:3 (1988), pp. 405-436.

23 op. cit., de Lauretis, "The Essence of a Triangle", in differences, p. 10.

24 ibid., p. 11.

25 ibid., p. 12.

(a) sums up, according to de Lauretis, Locke's description of nominal essence exemplified by his statement that the essence of a triangle lies in its being made up of three lines meeting at three angles. De Lauretis does not discuss (b) but (b) sounds very like Locke's rendering of real essence *viz.* the thing itself, the underlying 'reality' of a thing.

Using this distinction, de Lauretis asserts that we should not understand feminists to be talking about real essence. She argues that since women are made and not born, nominal essence must be what feminists mean when they speak of essence and ultimately, of essentialism. The idea of nominal essence 'gels' with the feminist conception of the construction of women, since feminists envision the essence of woman to be a "totality of properties, qualities and attributes" which they "define, envisage or enact for themselves (and some in fact attempt to live out in 'separatist' communities), and possibly also wish for other women".[26] De Lauretis reminds us that this describes not a present state of affairs, a current reality, but a project revolving around a vision of the future, which encompasses the past. This is precisely what gives feminism its historical specificity.[27] As we shall see, this retrospective and futuristic perspective is very influential in feminist theological discussion.

Thus, de Lauretis seems to think that nominal essence (the conceptually necessary properties: the properties which we conceive of as belonging to something and which, therefore, constitute the essence of a particular thing), is what feminists should prefer. This essence is produced through language practices and is inherently more flexible, more accommodating, than real essence (the underlying reality or thing itself which is not language or perception dependent). This distinction between the ontological (the 'real') and language (the nominal) is important, because it relates directly to feminist sentiment which regards discursive practices as perhaps the most significant feature in the construction of women. (Hence the claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman".[28])

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[26] ibid.

[27] ibid., p. 11.

[28] See Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (trans. H. M. Parshley) (Picador Books, London, 1949), p. 295.

Since the notion of real essence presupposes an inherent, underlying, objective and substantial reality, that de Lauretis seeks to dismiss 'it' as the atemporal and ahistorical meaning/referent of feminist talk about essence, is not surprising. The idea of nominal essence provides an alternative to real essence: essence is no longer reified, a 'thing', but becomes a product of language practices.

However, de Lauretis' assumption about the 'proper' meaning of 'essence' is not born out by other feminist writers although they do confirm her concern about real essence. Diana Fuss' discussion, for example, highlights the ambiguities of the term, but she does not share de Lauretis' reservations about what feminists might mean when they talk about essence. Certainly, she sees problems with essentialist notions, but her introductory remarks serve to belie de Lauretis' position. Fuss writes:

> Essentialism is classically defined as a belief in true essence - that which is most irreducible, unchanging and therefore constitutive of a person or thing. This tradition represents the traditional Aristotelian understanding of essence. . . . Most obviously, essentialism can be located in appeals to a pure or original femininity, a female essence, outside the boundaries of the social and thereby untainted (though perhaps repressed) by a patriarchal order. . . . Essentialism emerges perhaps most strongly within the very discourse of feminism, a discourse which presumes upon the unity of its object of inquiry (women) *even* when it is at pains to demonstrate the differences within this admittedly generalising and imprecise category [her italics].[29]

For Fuss then, the having of an essence in the traditional metaphysical sense, is precisely the having of that fixed and determined and irreducible something which makes a woman, Woman, what one could think of as Locke's real essence. On Fuss' reading of the debate about essence, women are said to be women precisely because they all have the same female essence, the essence of Woman: each woman is an instantiation of the universal Woman. For her, this is what makes essentialism problematic.

It is this traditional metaphysical sense which de Lauretis denies to feminists. De Lauretis' intuition that feminists are talking about nominal, rather than real, essence sounds correct if one construes the two conceptualisations as disjunctive. (One can

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[29] Diana Fuss, Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference (Routledge, New York & London, 1989), p. 2.

choose either, but not both positions).[30] But her claim that feminists cannot really mean Locke's real essence when they speak of essence, is dubious, since she maintains that there are "few truly fundamentalist thinkers to whom the term essentialist would properly apply".[31] The underlying assumption here is that one could not **really** be a feminist and a real essentialist.

The complexity of the idea of social constructionism is highlighted by this puzzlement. In Volatile Bodies Elizabeth Grosz argues that:

> . . . the constructionists hold a number of distinctive commitments, including the belief that it is not biology per se but the ways in which the social system organises and gives meaning to biology that is oppressive to women. The distinction between the "real" biological body and the body as object of representation is a fundamental presumption. . . . For constructionists the sex/gender opposition, which is a recasting of the distinction between the body, or what is biological and natural, and the mind, or what is social and ideological is still operative.[32]

As Grosz describes constructionists, the precise problem to which de Lauretis alludes is embedded in their theory. Constructionists are simultaneously essentialist and not essentialist because they accept the dualistic division of the nature and the social, mind and body. In chapter 2 I will argue that this is a position which is implied by Mary Daly's work; and in chapter 3 I will maintain that it is a position against which Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues.

For now, let us assume that de Lauretis' claim about what feminists are actually saying is valid: feminists, in talking about essence, really are referring to a collection of discursive practices which somehow constitute women as, for example, historically specific agents. On Grosz's reading of the debate, it is possible to give some interpretation of the idea that there is something essential about women in terms of real essence, and that they are also socially constructed. What is essential is their bodies,

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30 Rosi Braidotti alludes to this problem (in terms of culture and nature) for feminist theory in her essay "The Politics of Ontological Difference" in op. cit., Teresa Brennan, Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis, *passim*.

31 op. cit., de Lauretis, "The Essence of a Triangle", in differences, p. 12.

32 op. cit., Grosz, Volatile Bodies, p. 17.

their sex, and what is socially constructed is the interpretation of their bodies, their gender.[33] How the 'two' relate to each other needs to be explicated though.

The resolution of this tension is important for any feminist theory, religious or secular, and can take at least three paths. Either one can argue that essentialist claims are false and one ought to opt for a form of social constructionism which denies the priority of 'brute' biology and 'brute' nature; or one can claim that social constructionism is false and opt for a form of essentialism; or one can claim, depending on how one works out the two positions, for example by denying the terms of the debate altogether (the construction of the opposition between nature and the social, sex and gender), that one should deny the incompatibility of the 'two' positions.

This thesis seeks to resolve the problem in terms of the latter, for the inconsistency indicates the very real concern of much feminist literature: just how does one construct a theory (or theories) of the female, Woman and women, which accounts for the female body, without abandoning the so-called traditional views of femininity and Woman? This is especially so when such views contain much which many women value (such as woman as peacemaker, woman as mother, woman as nurturer). And what does one do if one admits that language itself is a primary patriarchal structure/device responsible for the subjugation of women?

As I remarked earlier, de Lauretis is not alone in her invocation of Locke. Diana Fuss, who contrasts essentialism with constructionism, the belief that "self-evident kinds (like 'man' or 'woman') are in fact the effects of complicated discursive practices",[34] argues that constructionists maintain that "essence is itself a historical construction".[35] According to her the two positions, essentialism and constructionism, match the catch-

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[33] For a discussion of the sex/gender distinction see the following articles in Australian Feminist Studies 10 (Summer 1989): Anne Edwards, "The Sex/Gender Distinction: Has it Outlived its Usefulness?", pp. 1 - 12; Genevieve Lloyd, "Woman as Other: Sex, Gender, Subjectivity", pp. 13 - 22; Denise Thompson, 'The "Sex/Gender" Distinction: A Reconsideration', pp. 23 - 31; Moira Gatens, "Woman and her Double(s): Sex, Gender and Ethics", pp. 33 - 47. See also, Nancy Jay, "Gender and Dichotomy" in A Reader in Feminist Knowledge (Routledge, London & New York, 1991), pp. 89 - 106.

[34] op. cit., Fuss, Essentially Speaking: Feminism, p. 5.

[35] ibid.

cries respectively of Ernest Jones "Woman is born, not made" and de Beauvoir, "Woman is made, not born"[36] the conjunction of which is problematic for feminists.

Essentialists, Fuss argues, have their problems with accusations of ahistoricity, making their categories dependent upon ontological and cultural assumptions which stand outside time and are thus immutable.[37] However Fuss believes that constructionism is not the straightforward theoretical model one might think it to be. She argues that its deployment often is dependent upon its own essentialising and simplistic notions of history.[38] It is arguable that this is also the case for feminist theologians who use social constructionism. If women's experience is constructed, and if women's experience provides the basis for feminist theologies, then feminist theologies are constructed: the point is quite trivial. But what is not trivial, and this has resonances with Hampson's complaints about the content of feminist theologies, is the question of divinity. That is to say, if women's experience is the basis of feminist theologies and as constructed, constructs divinity, then, as Frankenberry remarks, the Divine becomes a projection of women's experiences and as such, is immediately relativised. So the relation between women's experiences and divinity, using a constructionist model like Scott's for example, is not straightforward and may engender some very troublesome theorėtical problems. As a model, social constructionism is problematic and indeed it can maintain dualistic categorisation and thinking; a point I will be pursuing later on in the thesis. Note then that Fuss argues:

> Constructionists, too, though they may make recourse to historicity as a way to challenge essentialism, nonetheless work with uncomplicated and essentialising notions of history. While a constructionist might recognise that 'man' and 'woman' are produced across a spectrum of discourses, the categories 'man' and 'woman' still remain constant.[39]

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36 ibid., p. 3. This is Fuss' paraphrase of de Beauvoir.

37 Although I will return to the point later it is worth recalling here that Elizabeth Grosz holds that social constructionism depends upon essentialism.

38 I take up this point in my concluding chapter.

39 op. cit., Fuss, Essentially Speaking: Feminism, pp. 3 & 4.

Her basic criticism (and one might compare this with Scott), is that essentialism is intrinsic to constructionism, for constructionists continue to use and give meaning to terms, such as 'history', in an uninterrogated way. And the practice of pluralising terms "in order to privilege heterogeneity and to highlight important cultural and social differences"[40] does not solve the problem. One can make essentialist and thus universalising statements using plural forms, just as one can using singular forms. (Her example is 'American women are"'x"'.) Her tentative answer to what she sees as the **constructed** irreducibility of essence in constructionism and to our insecurities about firmly displacing essence, is to appeal to different '**kinds** of'.[41] She uses John Locke's discussion of essence to elaborate this point.

Locke, reiterates Fuss, contrasted nominal and real essence. Real essence, she asserts, connotes "the Aristotelian understanding of essence as that which is most irreducible and unchanging about a thing; nominal essence signifies for Locke a view of essence as merely a linguistic convenience, a classificatory fiction we need to categorise and to label".[42] Her purpose in using Locke's distinction is partly to point out that it roughly corresponds to the "oppositional categories of essentialism and constructionism"; partly as an analytic device to distinguish between the ontological and linguistic aspects of essentialism; and partly to suggest that "it is equally important to investigate their complicities as types of essentialisms members of the same semantic family".[43] Overall then, Locke's distinction, which she sees as an oppositional categorisation (in her use of *versus:* 'real' *versus* 'nominal' essence), is supposed to throw light on the infinitely regressing problem of essence and its rôle in perpetuating semantic practices which appear to be ahistorical. I read both Fuss' and de Lauretis' use of Locke's distinction as a convenient tool for either exploring (Fuss), or saving (de Lauretis) essentialist notions which operate within feminist discourse.

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40 ibid., p. 4.

41 ibid.

42 ibid.

43 ibid.

Both de Lauretis and Fuss realise that real essence is the internal constitution of objects or things. De Lauretis, however, is not specific about this, although she refers to essence as "absolute being or substance in the traditional metaphysical sense".[44] Hence we might take her to assume that there is some relation (perhaps that of identity) between essence and absolute being or substance in the traditional metaphysical sense.[45] Fuss is more specific. She notes that real essence is the real essence of a thing.[46] But it surely cannot be just **any thing**. According to Locke (and Fuss does reiterate this), "Essence may be taken for the being of anything, whereby it is what it is".[47]

The status of 'thing' is an enigma. What is the 'thing' which has real essence? Locke maintains that it is particulars which do. The traditional or standard interpretation of Aristotle, as I will argue shortly, is that species or natural kind*s* are what have essence. For Locke, the distinction between nominal and real essence has a basis in the distinction between, broadly speaking, language and reality. I suggest that the relationship between general terms and natural kinds corresponds to the distinction between language and reality. Locke, as we shall see, has subverted the Aristotelian notion that species not individuals have essence, and has attributed real essence to individuals, rather than holding that they share a common essence with all other members of their species or categories. That is not to say, however, that he has eliminated universal groupings or categories. On the contrary, those groupings now become conceptual or discursive items, constructed out of our language practices.

For Locke then, species, universal categories, general terms, are ontologically dependent upon the existence of individual things or simple substances. This is also the case with the triangle which de Lauretis cites. Locke says:

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[44] op. cit., de Lauretis "The Essence of a Triangle", in differences, p. 12. Apparently de Lauretis thinks of Aristotle as the traditional metaphysician from whom is derived the idea of "traditional metaphysical essence".

[45] It is not clear whether de Lauretis intends an inclusive use of "or" here, thus allowing a reading which will make "substance" and "absolute being" interchangeable terms. For the argument, it perhaps does not matter, but one should be aware that the terms in traditional metaphysics are by no means substitutable *salve veritate*.

[46] op. cit., Fuss, Essentially Speaking: Feminism, p. 4.

[47] John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (ed. Pringle-Patterson) (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1947) Bk. 111, ch. 6, p. 234.

> Thus a figure including a space between three lines is the real as well as the nominal essence of a triangle; it being not only the abstract idea to which the general name is annexed, but the very *essentia,* or being of the thing itself, that foundation from which all its properties flow, and to which they are all inseparably annexed.[48]

De Lauretis uses Locke's triangle example to make her metaphorical point about nominal essence. What she does not acknowledge, however, is that the nominal essence of a triangle is, as we have just seen, its real essence.[49] This is important because it is an example of the co-existence of both real and nominal essence. Ironically, that something can simultaneously have real essence and nominal essence is therefore to be found in Locke's work to which de Lauretis is appealing to solve the essentialism question. However, there is a logically self-evident tone about the way in which Locke talks about the triangle (which he does more than once) which suggests that the term is analytic. So-called synthetic terms such as 'woman' and 'man' are not self evidently true as are analytic terms like 'triangle' .

De Lauretis seems to be arguing that just as there are many kinds of triangle, all of which must have three sides/angles, so there are many kinds of women, not having three sides, but identified through:

> . . . specific properties (e.g. the having of a sexed body), qualities (a disposition to nurturance, a certain relation to the body), or necessary attributes (e.g. the experience of femaleness, of living in the world as female) that women have developed or have been bound to historically, in their differently patriarchal socio-cultural context, which make them women and not men. One may prefer one triangle, one definition of women and/or feminism, to another and, within her particular conditions and possibilities of existence, struggle to define the triangle she wants or wants to be - feminists do want differently. And in these very struggles, I suggest, consist the historical development and the specific difference of feminist theory, the essence of the triangle.[50]

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[48] ibid., p. 236. For a discussion of the real essence of a triangle see op. cit., Woolhouse,"Locke's Theory of Knowledge", pp. 159ff.

[49] How we know this, is not explained by Locke.

[50] op. cit., de Lauretis "The Essence of a Triangle", in differences, p. 13.

The problem with making a metaphor out of Locke's triangle,[51] as de Lauretis attempts to do, is that a triangle is more than its nominal essence: once a triangle ceases to have three sides/angles, it is no longer a triangle and cannot be described thus - the definitional analyticity to which I alluded. The metaphor can work only if de Lauretis is willing to acknowledge some real essence to which the nominal essence can be 'attached'. She cannot make this acknowledgement without being a fundamentalist feminist, without employing a notion of thing-itself. So her appeal to Locke's triangle is self-defeating unless she is prepared to accept that the incompatibility of real and nominal essence is in some way resolvable.

My argument is that de Lauretis uses the distinction between real and nominal essence and then leaves the distinction hanging. Nothing turns on the distinction because in the end, de Lauretis does not explain why a nominalist interpretation of essence is better able to help us understand the causal relationship between real and nominal essence, which is intrinsic to Locke's account in the first place.

I have been suggesting that the distinction which de Lauretis points out between real and nominal essence, suggests a difficulty which needs to be addressed by feminist theorists. But an appeal to Lockean essence such as de Lauretis' does not help overcome that difficulty.[52] What in the end will distinguish her conception of woman's (nominal) essence from a conception of Woman's (real) essence, especially when the properties, relational qualities and necessary attributes about which she speaks seem to be able to be mapped, one onto the other? For the question remains - and I think de Lauretis begs it - even if women choose what kind of woman they will be (within certain cultural constraints and norms), what makes them women in the first place? That is to say, what, for women, is analogous to a triangle's three sides/angles? So her 'metaphor' as she calls it[53] cannot, and does not, do the job she wants of it.

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[51] It is worthwhile pointing out that Aristotle also uses the triangle in his discussion of essence in "Posterior Analytics" Book 1, ch.4, 73a 35.

[52] In her discussion of Alcoff, de Lauretis does not see the need to maintain oppositional categories "when one already has the vantage point of a theoretical position that overtakes or sublates them". op. cit., de Lauretis, "The Essence of a Triangle", in The Essential Difference, p. 11.

[53] op. cit., de Lauretis "The Essence of a Triangle", in differences, p. 3.

Fuss' understanding of Locke's distinction and the possibilities it has for use by feminists, acknowledges the existence of the distinction between real and nominal essence, yet she disavows the idea that nominal and real essence are necessarily opposed. Her recognition of the rôle of general terms, amongst which she includes 'class', is vital to the discussion. This is so because, as we have seen, part of the debate involves elucidation of the relation between Woman and individual women. As I suggested in my Introductory essay, this is a problem for feminist theologies which claim women's experience as their foundation and are attracted by the possibilities of social constructionism over essentialism.

Locke's theory about essence vacillates between a constitutive (causal)[54] account of the rôle of real essence in the establishment of abstract ideas and the denial that we should speak of them at all; and the insistence that there is nominal essence constituted by abstract ideas by which we classify substances into sorts or general categories.

> It is true that I have often mentioned a real essence, distinct in substance from those abstract ideas of them, which I call their nominal essence. By this real essence I mean that real constitution of anything which is the foundation of all those properties that are combined in, and are constantly found to co-exist with the nominal essence; that particular constitution which everything has within itself, without any relation to anything without.[55]
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> and
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> But they not having any idea of that real essence in substances, and their words signify nothing but the ideas they have . . .[56]
>
> and
>
> The measure and boundary of each sort or species whereby it is constituted that particular sort and distinguished from others, is that we call its essence, which is nothing but that abstract idea to which the name is annexed.[57]

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54 op. cit., John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Bk. III, ch. 6, p. 246.

55 ibid., p. 245.

56 ibid.

57 ibid., p. 242.

The discussion of real and nominal essences takes place in the context of a controversy about general or universal terms which Locke had inherited from scholastic philosophy. This is important because Locke goes to great lengths to establish that real essence does not belong to real, general classes (species or natural kinds), but to particulars or individuals and that nominal essence is constituted by general (linguistic) terms. In other words sorts and species are 'defined' by their nominal essence, what it is which enables us to categorise in the first place.[58]

So real essence constitutes the insensible part of any particular and cannot be known. This is an epistemological problem, a problem of knowledge about the definitionally unknowable. The ontological problem, whether or not there is real essence independent of language and discursive practices, cannot be solved within Locke's program because of its dependence upon ideas. Thus language and ideas are a fundamental reality for Locke and even the supposition of real essence is dependent upon a prior possession of abstract ideas. That is to say, if we could determine the real essence of any substance, if we could say that it is of this kind, then this would presuppose linguistic practices which categorise according to nominal essence.[59]

Fuss introduced "the Lockean theory of essence to suggest both that it is crucial to discriminate between the ontological and linguistic orders of essentialism and that it is equally important to investigate their complicities as types of essentialisms, members of the same semantic family".[60] As I read Fuss, her strict insistence for purposes of clarification, upon the polarising categories of ontology and linguistic order, leaves open whether they can belong to the same semantic family. How can they? On my reading real essence and nominal essence must belong to quite different semantic families. To call them both 'essentialist' positions in terms of viewing nominal essence as ultimately reducible to real essence, is misguided: they do not mean the same thing at all.

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[58] See D.M. Armstrong, Universals: An Opinionated Introduction, Focus Series (Westview Press, Boulder, 1989), for a lengthy discussion of universals, nominalism and realism. See also D.M. Armstrong, Universals and Scientific Realism, vol. 1, Nominalism and Realism, (Cambridge University Press, 1978); Roger Teichman, Abstract Entities, Part II "Universals and Events", ch. 3, "Universals" (Macmillan, London, 1992).

[59] op. cit., Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, p. 246.

[60] op. cit., Fuss, Essentially Speaking, p. 5.

Nominal essence constitutes a linguistic realm, the discursive world of language practice in which we name, categorise and structure. Real essence is the underlying constitutive, but unknowable, substance: that which makes something what it is. Nominal essence, in being linguistic items or abstract ideas, describes things. Nominal essence is, therefore, a descriptor and not reducible to real essence, just as real essence is not reducible to nominal essence. It is arguable that nominal essence is not, strictly speaking, essence at all but is causally constituted as a descriptor, in language, through the operation of an unknowable ontological foundation. As language, nominal essence will be subject to change: fluid and in time. This undoubtedly has great appeal to constructionists who wish to deny real essence, who for example wish to take a different view of constructionism from Grosz's claim that constructionists still accept that the body is biological and natural. For theorists like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, as we shall see, there is some cogency in the claim that nominal essence is essence because of the way in which language articulates positions that depend upon naturalising assumptions. According to her, language practice can simply revalorise the categories one seeks to deny.

For Fuss, the distinction serves to highlight the polarity between ontology and language, but it is a mistake for her to assume that real and nominal essence are members of the same semantic family. Even given the polarity (which Fuss denies), they seem to me to belong to quite different realms of meaning although they are causally related. The causal relation between the two needs to be explicated: since we know nothing about real essence, the nature of the causal relation (and if there is one) is problematic. The meaning of nominal essence lies in language construction; the meaning of real essence lies outside language construction and appears to be almost a Kantian unknowable noumenal 'object'. Real essence, I would argue might even escape semantic considerations.[61]

Hence the rigour with which Locke argues on the whole for nominal essence, could be used by constructionists to settle once and for all the question of essence:

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[61] I take this up further in my final chapter when I argue that language conceals and reveals. This is part of the notion of the sensible transcendent which is also known as god according to the commentator on Irigaray, Margaret Whitford. See chapter 5 of this thesis.

essence either exists or it does not. If it exists, then it must be real essence. If it does not, then what we have taken to be essential (in the sense of that which makes something what it is) is intrinsic to our discursive practice, not to the things we talk about and describe. Those things, it can be and is argued, are themselves somehow produced by discourse. Locke's distinction can, therefore, be used to great advantage by constructionists, and they need not fear disparaging comments about their underlying essentialism, as Fuss argues they ultimately must.[62] But this does not close the issue. The danger of an extreme relativism in the form of linguistic idealism makes a social constructionist project which potentially argues that everything is only discursively produced. On this reading, 'reality' is a construction of language practice. I shall be returning to this issue in my discussion of Schüssler Fiorenza and taking it up again in my final chapter.

The strict polarisation of ontology and language, which Fuss implies is present in the debate, has then to be encountered and interrogated. The pull of the ontology/language dichotomy rebounds through philosophical history. Fuss realises the fruitlessness of maintaining the divide between essentialism and constructionism, which I am here reading as ontology and language. That is why she says:

> If we are to intervene effectively in the impasse created by the essentialist constructionist divide, it might be necessary to begin questioning the *constructionist* assumption that nature and fixity go together (naturally), just as sociality and change go together (naturally). In other words, it may be time to ask whether essences can change and whether constructionists can be normative [her italics].[63]

Schüssler Fiorenza makes exactly these constructionist assumptions and rejects naturalism because of its assumed connection with essentialism conceived of in both real and nominalist terms. On the other hand, Luce Irigaray does not acknowledge the divide in the first place, and offers a different metaphysical framework in which to figure the notions of women, the feminine and divinity. So Fuss' point is pertinent to theology just

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62 op. cit., Fuss, Essentially Speaking, pp. 4 & 5.

63 ibid., p. 6.

as it is to feminist theory more generally. I agree with her that the division needs to be challenged and I explore a way of mounting that challenge in the work of Irigaray.

Fuss' belief that we cannot escape the tugs of essentialism because of "continued semantic use"[64] is important and worthwhile pursuing. Grosz, as we shall see, asserts that social constructionism relies on a notion of essentialism.[65] If that is the case, discursive practices would essentialise just as ontological commitment to real essence does, which is the view Schüssler Fiorenza holds.

However, for de Lauretis this problem remains unsolved. De Lauretis defers the issue by refusing to acknowledge that many feminists at all **really mean** 'real essence' when they speak of essence.

> In other words barring the case in which woman's "essence" is taken as absolute being or substance in the traditional metaphysical sense (and this may actually be the case for a few, truly fundamentalist thinkers to whom the term essentialist would properly apply), for the great majority of feminists the "essence " of a woman is more likely the essence of a triangle than the essence of the thing-in-itself . . .[66]

If the above is the case, it is difficult to understand why the term 'essentialist' is seen as pejorative, for feminists are usually **accused** of being essentialist: it is not a term of approbation.[67] Deferring the meaning simply by invoking the dubious metaphor of the triangle does not explain, nor can it, the problems encountered by anti-essentialist feminists.

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[64] Her example is actually 'man', 'woman' and 'history', but one can extrapolate to all other general terms. See op. cit., Fuss, Essentially Speaking, p. 4.

[65] op. cit., Grosz, Volatile Bodies, p. 213, endnote 20.

[66] op. cit., de Lauretis, "The Essence of a Triangle", p. 12. It is worthwhile noting here that "thing-in-itself" is Kantian, not Lockean, terminology. Kant's thing-in-itself is different from Locke's real essence and the meaning of the two should not be conflated.

[67] See discussion of Irigaray's alleged essentialism in Monique Plaza '"Phallomorphic Power" and the Psychology of "woman"' in Ideology and Consciousness, 4 (Autumn 1978), pp. 5 - 35; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation (Beacon Press, Boston, 1992); and Toril Moi, Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (Routledge, London, 1991); Margaret Whitford, Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine (Routledge, London & New York 1991); Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, Margaret Whitford (eds.), Engaging With Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought (Columbia University Press, New York, 1994).

My discussion so far indicates that there are several problems which arise from both de Lauretis' and Fuss' contribution to the sex/gender essentialist issue. What emerges is that the difficulties which arise from deciding what it is to be 'Woman', a woman, have their origins in the debate about realism and nominalism. In turn, these debates emphasise different readings of the given and natural. Social constructionism and essentialism, as Fuss points out, are not as clearly distinguishable as one might think.

Essentialism is a problem because of the kinds of interpretations possible for essence and associated with being a woman, being female and/or being feminine. De Lauretis' and Fuss' appeals to Locke seem, however, to complicate matters even more. Locke's discussion of essence was intended to refute Aristotle's position on substance and essence. For different reasons and with different projects in mind all three, Locke, de Lauretis and Fuss, set out to combat Aristotelian essence.

Many feminists hold Aristotle responsible in some way for the undervaluing of women. The persistence of Aristotelianism in theology remains: from the doctrine of transubstantiation, to the belief that women have their own special nature which is constituted by a feminine essence and prevents them from being ordained in the Catholic Church. So I turn briefly to Aristotle's rendering of essence and women. In doing this, I examine some further complications in the essence of woman issue: class and race, as Elizabeth Spelman sets out the issues. My initial discussion revolves around the universal term 'Woman' and the particular term 'woman' because Aristotle's conception of essence was concerned, in part, with how one defines membership of a species. In feminist theory, the highly contested term 'Woman', used as a universal term, (for example 'Woman's experience is the foundation of feminist theology', focuses the debate about essentialism).

Aristotle, Women and Elizabeth Spelman

Universal Woman

In the "Metaphysics", Aristotle wrote:

> Nothing, then, which is not a species of a genus will have an *essence* - only species will have it, for these are thought to imply not merely that the

> subject participates in the attribute and has it as an affection, or has it by accident; but for everything else as well, if it has a name, there will be a *formula of its meaning - viz.* that this attribute belongs to this subject; or instead of a simple formula we shall be able to give a more accurate one; but there will be no definition and no essence.[68]

In Aristotle's account of essence, 'Woman' does not constitute a natural kind. The natural kind is what we in the twentieth century would think of as the species, *homo sapiens*. Hence the species, *homo sapiens,* is what has essence. Both women and men share the same essence because they are members of the same species: individual women have essence but they have that essence **in virtue of** being members of the same species as men, not in virtue of being individual women. This does not mean that individual women lack individual essence. It simply means that every instance of woman has exactly the same instantiated individual essence: that she is definitionally a member of a particular species. That is to say, on this account of Aristotelian essence, there is no Man's and no Woman's essence. There is only one 'species-essence' and that essence constitutes the humanness of individual women and men.

On this interpretation of Aristotle, to properly answer the question 'What is Elizabeth?', one must reply 'She is a human being' **not** 'She is a woman'. The question of what Elizabeth is, is a question of how one defines her, and one defines her in terms of the species of which she is a member.

According to Aristotle some members of the species are more perfect forms of that species than others.[69] Even so, even if "male and female are appropriate affections of animal",[70] the male is the more perfect specimen of the species. What is not the most perfect embodiment of the species lacks in something. The female lacks the capacity for deliberative reasoning and lacks vital heat. One should understand the female as the privative of the male. Not only that, she is passive in the reproduction of the species (she provides the matter while he provides the form, and form is superior to matter).

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68 op. cit., Aristotle, Basic Works "Metaphysics", Book VII, ch. 4, 1040.

69 ibid.

70 ibid.

On this account, women have their essence in virtue of being members of the human species: they are defined in terms of that membership; and being female is privative, or the negation of being male. The former tells us that for Aristotle, women do not constitute a species having a distinctive essence. Definitionally, women are 'tied' to men. This makes the enterprise of attributing a specific woman's essence somewhat problematic. Either of the following could be the case: women, because they are (provide) matter rather than form, do not have essence,[71] or, women share the same essence as men so that whatever is the essence of men, is the essence of women. However, the latter is complicated by women's lack of full deliberative reason and vital heat, which is partly spelt out by the idea of the female as the privative of the male, exemplified in the Pythagorean Table of Opposites.

The idea that Woman somehow constitutes a distinctive (inferior) class which is identifiable by defining (and privative) characteristics, operates in Western intellectual history and has been attributed to the Pythagorean Table. This Table, which Aristotle cites in the opening chapters of "Metaphysics",[72] sets the margins for characterising Woman/women. Not only that, throughout Aristotle's various treatises one finds his many infamous 'sexist' remarks, for example his lengthy discussion of the rôle of semen in intercourse and generation (between female and male, not woman and man)[73] and his discussion of the inferiority of women compared with men.[74] Those remarks have influenced the concepts 'Woman'/'woman' and how women have been constituted: as inferior, illogical, natural mothers, care givers, whores, virgins, emotional, irrational and so on.[75]

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71 And I think Irigaray has this in mind when she argues that women do not exist. See chapter 4 of this thesis.

72 op. cit., Aristotle, The Metaphysics, Book 1 986a. As the table is cited by Aristotle, it represents the first principles (ten in number) stated by the Pythagoreans.

73 ibid., Aristotle, Basic Works, "*De Generatione Animalium*" (trans.Arthur Platt), 715a - 731b 10.

74 "Aristotle", in Rosemary Agonito (ed.), History Of Ideas On Women: A Source Book (Putnam, New York, 1977); op. cit., Aristotle, Basic Works, "Politics" (trans. Benjamin Jowett), 1254b, 10 - 15, 1260a, 20 - 30.

75 Interestingly, many of these 'feminine attributes' are inconsistent with each other (whore, virgin, and mother for example)

As I read Aristotle, the notion of Woman's essence has developed partly from interpretations of female matter (physiological/biological) and partly from a picture of the female contained in the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, read in concert with the understanding that everything has essence.

Bound/Infinity	Rest/Motion
Odd/Even	Straight/Crooked
Unity/Plurality	Light/Darkness
Right/Left	Good/Bad
Male/Female	Square/Oblong[76]

In this Table the characteristics which are positioned on the right hand side of each pair (as the reader reads) are inferior to those on the left of the pair. And those on each side of the pair are related to all the other characteristics on the same side of the pair. By association then, the female is related to plurality, motion, darkness, badness, infinity and so on. Genevieve Lloyd remarks:

> In the Pythagorean table of opposites, formulated in the sixth century BC, femaleness was explicitly linked with the unbounded - the vague, the indeterminate - as against the bounded - the precise and clearly determined. The Pythagoreans saw the world as a mixture of principles associated with determinate form, seen as good, and others associated with formlessness - the unlimited, irregular or disorderly - which were seen as bad or inferior. . . . Thus 'male' and 'female', like the other contrasted terms did not here function as straightforwardly descriptive classifications. 'Male', like the other terms on its side of the table, was construed as superior to its opposite; and the basis for this superiority was its association with the primary Pythagorean contrast between form and formlessness.[77]

Careful inspection of the Table shows that it does not contain reference to Woman or women. Certainly, 'female' occurs as the inferior to male, but 'female' is not co-extensive with 'woman' (there are female platypus, emus and kangaroos). 'Female' would be coextensive with 'woman' only if, in some biological sense, 'woman' were denominated as the female of the human species, so that if ever one used the term 'woman' one would know immediately that one was referring only to the female of the human species. But as it stands, the relationship between 'female' and 'Woman'/'women' is not explicated. All

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[76] op. cit., Aristotle, The Metaphysics (trans. McMahon), Book 1, 986a.

[77] Genevieve Lloyd, The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy (Methuen University Paperbacks, London, 1984), p. 3.

that one can argue is that in order to be a woman, it is necessary that one be female. But what it means to be female is itself problematic.

The 'female' is a contested category whose boundaries are difficult to delineate. An obvious and perhaps intuitive place from which to begin characterising the female is from a 'brute' biological perspective. At this basic level, it could be argued that to be a woman means to be embodied as a female. But as we shall see in chapter 3, this idea of brute biology is also contested.

The opposing principles identified in the Pythagorean Table have provided a springboard for the development of sets of natural characteristics or properties which together have been seen to constitute the essence of Man or Woman. As the female in the Pythagorean Table of Opposites is undervalued and inferior to the male, the essence of Woman is seen as an agglomerate of inferior properties, properties which tie her to materiality, sensuality, sin and ignorance.[78] On this account, Woman's essence is specific, but it is created through the negation of the good and the valued. Her essence is just that set of natural characteristics or properties which identify her as a specific universal category. Whatever is true of one member of the category, is true of all. That category is tied to the species of which she is a member (*homo sapiens*), but it is not coextensive with the species. In other words, it is not an Aristotelian natural kind and not an Aristotelian species *essence*.

Since the terms on the same side as 'the female' in the Pythagorean Table are aligned with the female, these become strong candidates for explaining, by association, what it is to be female, thus what it means to be a woman. If this is the case, the idea of Woman/woman is not the 'merely female' thought of in terms of the biological. One might also use the associative characteristics in the Table to explain the female. So then, there seem to be at least two sets of characteristics, the physiological/biological (the characteristics of the female body), and the associative, that characterise the female.

Hence, Woman's essence seems to be over and beyond the merely female, brute female biology. That is to say, while there is a notion of woman which denotes a biological entity, the connotations of being a woman are not circumscribed by this mere biological

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[78] For a development of this theme of dualism, see op. cit., Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex.

attribution. On this reading, Woman is a category secondary to the category 'female'. If that is the case, then one needs to be able to explain how one constructs one's notion of Woman/women and then explain the ensuing relation that must exist between the primary category (female) and the secondary (Woman/woman).

I have been claiming that there is a legitimate sense in which one can speak of 'Woman'/'woman' that denotes the female of the human species. One could appeal to such a denotation, claiming that one always means **at least** the necessary attribution of female characteristics when one uses the terms. But the heart of the matter is: which female characteristics? The physiological/biological, or what I am calling the associative? The associative characteristics are what are *prima facie* in dispute in the sex/gender essentialist issue. In other words, the characteristics which appear in the Pythagorean Table of Opposites have a conceptual weight that nudges the physiological/biological to the side.

Once it is agreed that being a woman necessarily implies being female, the characteristics that we find in the Pythagorean Table move into the centre of the debate. Woman has essence attributed to her by association with unequal members of paired opposites. Woman's essence is infinite, plural and bad, and that essence is seen as natural. Woman has essence, necessarily related to her biological femaleness, but it is written in terms of the privative, atrophied in relation to the positive status of man. As we shall see, this is sufficient for Irigaray to remark that women have no essence except through the negation of the good and positive that is exemplified by men.

That picture has generated a category from which the universal essence of Woman has derived. With some syllogistic foreplay, 'Woman' has been immortalised as a universal category which depends for its identity upon the possessing of certain attributes. That is to say, what 'woman' connotes is constituted by some property or set of properties or characteristics which constitute Woman's 'essence' or her 'nature'. In order to be Woman, x **must exemplify** that property or set of constitutive natural properties or characteristics: each member of the category, each individual woman, has those natural properties (the universalisation to which Grosz referred). On this reading, the argument about Woman's and, subsequently, individual women's essence, is based on a syllogistic deduction which carries the force of necessity. On this interpretation, to

say that x is Woman but to deny those characteristics would be to utter a contradiction. Hence, the argument would state, whatever is the natural essence of Woman, is her female essence and is necessary to Woman.

As many feminists have been very quick to point out, concepts like these do not account for the differences amongst women. Not only does this kind of conceptualisation disallow the rôle of socio-politics and discourse, but they fail to account for difference itself. If all women come out of one mould so to speak, how is it that there are so many differences?

Critics like Elizabeth Spelman view with suspicion the idea that in Aristotle's work, every human female is a woman. Spelman regards Aristotle's work as classist and elitist as well as sexist. If one were to reject an Aristotelian-influenced account of Woman as essentialist, that one could speak of woman *per se,* is still questionable for Spelman. Spelman's work is important and is used by Schüssler Fiorenza. Spelman highlights differences between women and problematises the idea that one can speak of women's experiences if one means to refer to the universal category, Woman. Like Scott, she opts for a reading which emphasises women's experience as a category constitutive of women, rather than women constituting their experiences. Hence Women's experience, as the foundation for feminist theologies may well become problematic for reasons greater than definitional and whether or not woman is socially constructed or the embodiment of an essentialist ideal. This is where the question, 'The experience of which women?' comes to the fore.

Are all female humans women?

Elizabeth Spelman has been one of the most vocal proponents of approaching the sex/gender essentialist issue in the context of class and race. She argues that Western (white middle class)[79] feminism has not only dominated feminist theory and practice, but that Western feminists have taken their own case to be representative of all cases. In doing this, Western feminists have excluded and silenced the voices of women from

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[79] Elizabeth Spelman, Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought (Beacon Press, Boston, 1988), p. ix and *passim.*

cultures other than their own and have obliterated the differences between women.[80] White feminists have rendered non-white, non-middle class women as 'other' in an elitist move that mimics the anthropocentricism ('human condition' discourse) of traditional philosophical discourses:[81]

> It is not news that dominant Western feminist thought has taken the experiences of white middle-class women to be representative of, indeed normative for, the experiences of all women. Much of such thought, it is now common to say, expresses and reinforces the privilege of white middle-class women: their lives and works, their griefs and joys constitute the norm in relation to which other women's lives - if they are mentioned at all - are described as "different."[82]

For Spelman, the issue of how "feminist theory has confused the condition of one group with the condition of all"[83] directly relates to systemic middle-class privilege, which seeks to preserve itself. Using the philosophical works of Plato and Aristotle, she sets out to show that 'woman' was ambiguous (Plato) and quite specifically a socio-political rather than anthropological term (Aristotle). Already in the use and meaning of the term 'woman' in their works, the idea of class and race privilege existed, which meant that women had status because of what they did or could do (Plato) and where they were situated (Aristotle) in the hierarchies established by male rulers of the *polis*.

In The Republic Socrates, according to Spelman, held that "people ought to engage in different pursuits only when their differences are relevant to the capacity to carry out the task",[84] so that ultimately women and men, although reproductively different, could have equality in terms of their functions in the state, but this was directly related to

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[80] Cited often by, for example, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Experience in White Feminist Theory", in Sex, Race and God: Christian Feminisms in Black and White (Crossroad, New York, 1989), are feminist theorists like Betty Friedan, Mary Daly, Simone de Beauvoir, and any feminist theorist who takes sex/gender as the primary category of oppression from which all other oppressive categories (like class and race), follow. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, seems to hold such a view in Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology (SCM Press, London, 1983).

[81] op. cit., Spelman, Inessential Woman, p. 9.

[82] ibid., p. ix.

[83] ibid., p. 4.

[84] ibid., p. 21. See Plato, The Republic (trans. A.D. Lindsay) (ed. Terence Irwin) (Everyman Edition, J.M. Dent, London, 1992), Book Five, 454b-456c.

the manliness or womanliness of their souls. Further, that one is a man or a woman should have no bearing on one's capacity to be virtuous.

Spelman argues that Plato trod a difficult path in articulating his views on women. While he believed that biology was not destiny and that women should be involved in running the state, he vacillated in his use of the term 'woman'. The capacities of a person, argues Spelman, were, for Plato, not directly related to their embodiment.

> According to Plato, not all women are inferior to all men; some woman are equal to the best of men and in fact superior to other men. In the best and most widely governed state, we can expect to find women as well as men among the ruling class.[85]

However, that women could actually be involved in ruling meant that they had manly souls: the female philosopher-ruler had a female body and a manly soul.[86] Implicit in this system of rulers who could be either women or men, was the notion of class. Spelman points out that philosopher rulers, either women or men, were in a class of their own, superior to all others.

> But we must keep in mind that Plato's argument for the equality of some women to some men was inextricably intertwined with an argument for the superiority of that group of men and women to all other people. He may have refused to assume that biology is destiny, but that does not mean that all ways of ranking people disappear. The equality Plato talks about is only between men and women who would be guardians and philosopher-rulers. He is not talking about equality between slave men and philosopher women, or between slave women and philosopher women. Surely then we ought to ask : what kind of feminism is it that would gladly argue for a kind of equality between men and women of a certain class and at the same time for radical inequality between some women and some men, some women and some other women, some men and some other men?[87]

Being a man did not guarantee an elite position in the *polis*, just as being a woman did not guarantee inferiority. Class was also a determining factor in constituting

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85 op. cit., Spelman, Inessential Woman, p. 34.

86 Spelman argues that there were four possible combinations of the female/male and woman/man pairs. 1. manly soul/male body; 2. manly soul/female body; 3. womanly soul/male body; 4. womanly soul/female body. This constitutes Plato's ambiguous use of the term 'woman'. See op. cit., Spelman, Inessential Woman, p. 32. See op. cit., The Republic, Book Five, 453b-459e.

87 ibid., p. 35.

one's place. Spelman sees this system as iniquitous. In the final analysis, it was the philosopher-rulers who made decisions about the worth of people's souls:

> Plato arrogates to philosopher-rulers the capacity and authority to decide what differences between people matter and why. Anybody can know whether a person is male or female; only philosopher-kings and -queens can tell what a person's soul is really like.[88]

The point that Spelman makes is that white feminists have reproduced, or are in danger of reproducing, this iniquity. White feminists, according to her, need to recognise that class and race[89] significantly contributes to the gender debate when it comes to deciding what terms like 'woman's nature', 'woman's experience', 'as women' mean. Even in the Platonic works, class, gender and race factors are already at play.[90] So Spelman reads Plato as classist and racist as well as sexist, and argues that these all simultaneously contribute to an inequitable system.

For Aristotle, Spelman continues, the term 'woman' is clear and unequivocal: a woman is a member of the ruling class and therefore slaves cannot be women. Hence the term 'woman' is a socio-political gender term. She argues that sex and race are so interdependent in the Aristotelian scheme, that race and sex together form a necessary condition for having a gender. And 'man' and 'woman' are the two genders which could be attributable. Slaves have a sex: either female or male, but because they are slaves: they fail to have a gender.[91] The mark of the natural ruler, who is a man, according to Spelman, is a kind of masculine rationality exemplified by deliberative capacity:

> (m)en are to rule women, for in women the deliberative capacity of the rational element is without authority - it is easily overruled by the irrational element. Masters are to rule slaves, for while slaves, in virtue of the rational element in their souls, can hear and obey orders, they really don't have the capacity to deliberate. [92]

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88 ibid.

89 Class and race are interrelated because slaves were often the conquered and foreign races.

90 op. cit., Plato, The Republic, Book Five, *passim*.

91 op. cit., Spelman, Inessential Woman, pp. 54 & 55.

92 ibid., pp. 44 - 45. See op. cit., Aristotle, Basic Works, "Politics", 1254b - 1255a.

Lacking in deliberative capacity, women and slaves are therefore the natural inferiors to the ruler kings. But note the clue that it is women and slaves who lack this deliberative capacity.

Early in her work, Spelman distinguishes sex from gender, asking if sex is to do with "the physiological properties of femaleness" and if gender has to do with "the ways in which she [a woman] is expected in her culture to think, feel and act? If this weren't true no one would ever talk about a female having or lacking womanly qualities or not acting the way women are supposed to act" [my brackets].[93] On her analysis there is an intimate relation between sex, gender, class and deliberative reason. She remarks that rationality is not masculine rather than male: it is gendered or socially constructed. Rationality, reason, is constructed around a gender concept (relativised in relation to a culture). If that is the case, and gender is itself constructed, and its construction is determined by class, then the possession of reason is limited to a small number of persons in the *polis* and these turn out to be men (and women to a lesser degree). Only men, the rulers, are characterised by possession of full deliberative reason.

Spelman successfully shows that in the works of Plato and Aristotle 'woman' is respectively an ambiguous and unambiguous class and race term. Given this, and given recent interest in feminism and definitions of sex and gender, one may wonder if it is at all legitimate to ever speak of women without qualifying the term in some manner. Hence one should always speak of Chinese middle class women, or affluent black women, or poor white women and so on. In this way, for whom and to whom one speaks is immediately clear and on a class/race basis, one cannot be accused of colonising or of misrepresenting or silencing or excluding: one speaks for whom one specifies and for them alone.

The answer to the question which heads this section: Are all female humans women? is clearly in the negative: No, according to Spelman, not all female humans are women. 'Woman', is a class term. Female humans who are slaves or black or poor, who belong to underprivileged classes, are not aristocrats, are not women. And if this is the

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93 op. cit., Spelman, Inessential Woman, p. 14.

case, then the question with which I closed the previous section, The experience of which women?, as a foundation for feminist theologies needs careful consideration.

Given the interpretation of the origin of the concept 'Woman's essence', one might think there are very good grounds for rejecting real essentialist accounts of woman. It is possible to argue that if there is a monolithic essential Woman 'inside' every woman, then all women should be the same. Certainly they might have individual preferences which differ, but 'underneath it all women are all really the same'. Such an account is what is presupposed by the constructionists to whom Grosz refers, those who hold that there is a natural biological brute body around which interpretations are organised. But if Spelman is correct in arguing that 'woman' was, and remains, an exclusive term, then its use is always tentative and contested. If one always has to consider socio-political discursive practices (class and race as well as gender) when one thinks about the concept 'woman', then how is one to conceive of the relation between a woman and her body? Can one, *contra* Spelman ever speak of women as women without referring to class and race?

Spelman argues the difficulties of never speaking about or referring to women as women.[94]She is clear that the concept 'women' is not simply a gender concept: it is also a race and class concept. Hence she insists that when one speaks of women (and men) "we remember which women and men we are speaking about".[95] The trend in Anglo-American feminist theory has become for feminist theorists all to speak of race, class and gender in tandem. Those feminists who do not do this are often accused of operating under totalising concepts of 'woman'.

As we have seen, de Lauretis' dismissal of real essence ignores the fact that some feminists do take seriously the claim that essentialism is more than a debate about the historically and socially specific constitution of theory. This is exemplified by Grosz's description of social constructionist understandings of sex and gender. Mary Daly's work, I will argue in my next chapter, repeats this rendering of social constructionism and courts the idea, *contra* Spelman, that sex/gender is the primary analytic category. Schüssler Fiorenza attempts to re-read the notion of sex and gender by denying that there is brute

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94 ibid., p. 174 & p. 186, *passim* in chapter 7, "Now Your See Her, Now You Don't".

95 ibid., p. 186.

biology, brute nature, while appealing to Spelman's sex/gender/class/race analysis of the concept of woman. As we shall see, she does not quite solve the problem because she retains a notion of 'reality' independent of language which is untenable given her commitment to redescribing the natural in terms which deny its independence of language. Since my purpose in entering this debate is to discuss the plausibility of using women's experience as a foundation to feminist theologies, and thus for conceptualisations of divinity, the satisfactory resolution of this problem is imperative. Luce Irigaray, I will argue in my last two chapters, endorses the idea of the interdependence of the material and language and in doing this, presents an alternative to the problems of the nominalist/realist divide. For her, the finding of a Divine for women is a condition of women's being able to find themselves.

CHAPTER 2

ELEMENTAL PHILOSOPHY: LANGUAGE AND ONTOLOGY IN MARY DALY'S TEXTS

Feminist theologians such as Mary Daly and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza hold that the dominant masculine paternal image of God in Western theologies is based upon men's images and experiences of themselves and the world. Their saying this portends a major change for theology as it marks a moment when women admit that they might be alienated by masculine paternal imagery of God. However, it is one thing to recognise that women might be alienated by such imagery and another to argue that feminist politics arising from this disclosure has some investment in refiguring the idea of God. The plausibility of this investment is a problem because it signals an interesting move in philosophy of religion. Refiguring of divinity leads to a reformulation of some issues in philosophy in terms of feminist politics. It is entirely understandable that this perception of paternal masculine imagery should lead to a feminist philosophy of religion committed to reconceiving divinity in terms more appropriate to women's experience. But the moment this happens, it immediately raises a whole problematics of whether and how one can legitimately refer to women's experiences.

As early as 1960, Valerie Saiving had remarked on the absence of women's experience in theology.[1] Saiving's insight has now been appropriated by many feminist theologians and the subsequent course of feminist theologies has assumed that women's experience should be privileged in its developing canon. Accompanying this development has been a growing unease with the idea of women's experience. Judith Plaskow has suggested that 'women's experience' should be understood as "the experiences of women in the course of a history never free from cultural rôle definitions".[2] It is worth

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[1] Judith Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich (University Press of America, Lanham MD, 1980), p. 1. For Saiving's article see Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View", in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, (eds.) Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1979).

[2] op. cit., Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, p. 11.

adopting Plaskow's suggestion for how the term should be understood. The idea that women's experience is constructed, "an effect of complicated discursive practices",[3] and is not that which pertains to a pre-formed essential subject, has informed feminist theologies for many years.

In the previous chapter, I began exploring the concept 'Woman' as preliminary work for elucidating women's experience. I have not so far used or referred to 'the feminine'. Note, that Saiving's insight was not couched in terms of women's experience, rather **feminine** experience. She saw 'feminine experience' as peculiarly related to women and went on to write:

> Contemporary theological doctrines of love have, I believe, been constructed primarily upon the basis of masculine experience and thus view the human situation from the male standpoint. Consequently, these doctrines do not provide an adequate interpretation of the situation of women . . . nor, for that matter, of men . . .[4]

Plaskow's substitution of 'women's experience' for 'feminine experience' suggests either that she would want to reject the term 'feminine' or that she interprets the two as equivalent. Certainly she distinguishes between the Eternal Feminine and women's experience(s),[5] but her interest seems to be in the latter rather than the former. As I read Plaskow, she argues against the assumption that there is a woman's nature, the Eternal Feminine, which is tied to woman's biological functions as mother and nurturer. Plaskow is critical of the proposal that naturalness and passivity supposedly accompany maternal functions. Her consistent use of the phrase 'women's experience' implies a distance between 'it' and feminine experience: small wonder, when the feminine has been so implicated in the essentialising of the Eternal Feminine.[6]

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3 Diana Fuss, Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference (Routledge, New York & London, 1989), p. 2.

4 Quoted by Plaskow in op. cit., Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, p. 1. See also, Saiving, "The Human Situation", in op. cit., Womanspirit Rising, p. 27.

5 See, for example, op. cit., Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, p. 31 & p. 173.

6 It is possible that Plaskow reads 'feminine experience' as 'women's experience' in a deliberate attempt to sidestep the problems which beset the Eternal Feminine. If to speak of the feminine is immediately to make an association with the Eternal Feminine, then it is best left to the side. For the moment, I will not use the term 'feminine' unless it occurs in the texts I am reading.

What I am interpreting as Plaskow's rejection of the term 'feminine' echoes Mary Daly's project in The Church and the Second Sex, originally published in 1968. In that work, Daly attacks the Eternal Feminine as an essentialising concept. Daly's later works do not feature the term 'feminine'. Indeed, the feminine has for many feminists, including feminist theologians,[7] become a term which spontaneously evokes the spectre of essentialism.

In this chapter I will be exploring Mary Daly's analysis of the essentialising Eternal Feminine. In terms of my project in chapter 1, the Eternal Feminine represents just the kind of essentialising notion which feminists have rejected. The Eternal Feminine is an example of that which de Lauretis denies feminists might mean when they speak of real essence. Daly has no doubt that the concept of real essence, proclaimed in Christian literature for hundreds of years, has guided the lives of millions of women and to their detriment. Hence, Daly makes a deliberate attempt to envision women's discourse and ontology as intimately connected with each other. Because of the emphasis Daly places on discourse and the ontological repercussions which follow from that, one is entitled to read Daly as a social constructionist.

In discussing her work, I move through Daly's critique of essentialism to accusations that she is essentialist and racist. I explore how Daly interprets and treats 'woman', the rôle of language and ontology, the body and the Divine. Daly is worthy of deep consideration because she was one of the early advocates of taking seriously the claims of language in the social production of women. Daly did this within a theological context. Her denunciation of the Eternal Feminine was accompanied by a strong stand for social constructionism which would produce a new idea of woman. She believed that language was the means for women, through recovering the task of naming, to gain freedom from oppression.

On reading her early work it is possible to think that Daly believes one could talk about women as a distinct category apart from race and class. That is to say, it is possible to interpret her as holding the view that one can speak of woman **as** woman as a category defined in terms of sex/gender alone. Hence, for Daly, 'woman' could be

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[7] See for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation (Beacon Press, Boston, 1992).

regarded primarily as a sex/gender term. Recall that Spelman maintained that sex/gender together with class and race constitute women. Daly's argument which uses sex/gender as the primary analytic category assumes, it could be argued, that all women are basically the same. For this reason, one could read her as precisely the kind of feminist deserving of Spelman's ire.

As we shall see, Daly's failure to speak of race and class as constitutive of women, has caused a great deal of controversy in feminist circles. Daly seems to be a privileged white woman speaking for herself and other privileged white women. Hence it is arguable that for Daly, 'women's experience' is an exclusive category, excluding by silence and omission, the voices of 'other' women. I will argue that it is not clear that this is the case.

That women are made and not born appears, on the one hand, to be a proposition to which Daly would have little trouble assenting. On the other, the imagery she uses and evokes, together with her positing an elemental philosophy which reaches back in women's (collective) consciousnesses, suggests that a women's essence, an elemental being, is there to be discovered and explored. Daly's most recent elaboration of Elemental philosophy suggests she returns to the Eternal Feminine she had rejected in her early works. In Elemental philosophy, one encounters the Divine in Ancestral Memory[8] as the Goddess, the Ultimate/Intimate Reality unravels. For Daly, the Divine mirrors the Goddess present in all women. Her critics suggest that Daly has re-invoked real essence. Is that the case?

The Church and the Second Sex

> At this point it is important to discuss briefly the role of symbols and metaphors in Elemental feminist philosophy, particularly since this mode of discourse traditionally has been disdained by philosophers in general and metaphysicians in particular. Since this work describes/unfolds a deviant philosophy - and a philosophy for deviants - the reader might jump to the facile conclusion that the use of metaphor is "understandable" or even "excusable" in the absence of an adequate philosophical/metaphysical tradition to express woman identified thought. The point is, however, that symbols and "mere" metaphors are required, not because of some deficiency or lack in the sphere of abstract

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[8] Mary Daly, in cahoots with Jane Caputi. Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language (Beacon Press, Boston, 1987), p. 72.

> conceptualisation, but because of the demanding, rigorous nature of the work itself.[9]
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> My objection to the Painted Bird in *Gyn/Ecology* is that its function is comparable to that of Sartre's holes and slime: it's not that it isn't very nice to talk about other women that way, or that Daly's language here ranges from tart to vitriolic, but that the projection of an image of evil in other women is indispensable to the Gyn/Ecological speaking position. "Evil in other women" may be unfair since it's a matter of what patriarchy has done to such women. But in that case, Daly deprives them of identity; they are women no-longer Women, male creations, non-Identified women; the ones *produced by* Daly's question in her Preface, "just *who* are 'the women'?"[10]

In this chapter I explore Daly's rejection of the Eternal Feminine and then I interrogate the allegation that Daly is essentialist.[11] It will become obvious why one might be excused for thinking that essentialism is implicit in her ontological concerns. I will show that this obviousness is superficial. My argument is designed to problematise some of the popular readings of Daly, which paint her as racist/elitist/supremacist, anti-feminist and essentialist.

Meaghan Morris, in writing about Gyn/Ecology, has pointed out that Daly uses language strategically.[12] For Morris, however, Daly gains little in this strategic use, arguing that Daly confines her critique to "a politics of subverting isolated signs, not one of transforming discourse"[13] or "language in use".[14] When she uses the term "strategy"[15] Morris seems to be referring to the way in which Daly deploys "punning, alliteration, word-

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9 Mary Daly, Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy (The Women's Press, London, 1984), p. 24.

10 Meaghan Morris, "A-mazing Grace: Notes on Mary Daly's Poetics" in Intervention 16 (n.d.), p. 83.

11 See, for example, Rosi Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy (trans. Elizabeth Guild) (Polity Press, Oxford, 1991), p. 207; op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 106.

12 op. cit., Morris, "A-mazing Grace", pp. 71 - 73.

13 ibid., p. 71.

14 ibid., p. 73.

15 Grosz and other commentators on Irigaray use the term 'strategy' in discussing Irigaray's work. See chapter 4 of this thesis for a discussion of Irigaray's use of *mimēsis* used in this way.

play, allegory, and the Great Metaphor of the Voyage"[16] to achieve her revolutionary ends. If this is what Morris means then I fully concur. But, I would argue, Gyn/Ecology represents the beginnings only of this subversive strategy. For Daly carries this strategic practice into the later work, Pure Lust and culminates it in the production of her feminist dictionary, Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary.

I will argue that Daly is successfully strategic and that her ontological concerns could not be articulated in any other way. I will also argue contrary to Morris, that Daly's is not a strategy of subverting isolated signs at all, but an attempt to displace a supposedly neutral (but men's) discourse in favour of a women's discourse, the function of which is to articulate women's Be-ing.[17]

Daly's earlier works, The Church and the Second Sex and Beyond God the Father, did not appropriate language in a divisive and destabilising manner. In them, Daly spoke out vehemently for both the equality of women and for social justice in the Catholic Church in particular and the Christian Church in general. At the time, few women had had the courage to write as she did, so publicly and with the depth of scholarship and understanding which she displayed.[18]

Daly's primary task in The Church and the Second Sex was to argue for the equality of women and men as Church members, to expose the masculine bias of Christian theology and to demonstrate the explicit iniquitous practical and psychological consequences which this theology held (and continues to hold[19]) for women in the Church. She saw the Catholic Church as an oppressive, man-dominated institution which failed to reconcile its opposing views of women (as virgin and whore), but which used that opposition to revere, regulate and revile the lives of its women adherents. In Daly's view,

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16 op. cit., Morris, "A-mazing Grace", p. 73.

17 Daly uses the hyphenated forms Be-ing and be-ing to emphasise their 'verbness' so that the reader will not be tempted to reify, as she might if she were to read them as nouns.

18 See for evidence of this, Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex (with a new Feminist Post Christian Introduction by the Author) (Harper & Row, New York, 1975), *passim*.

19 Although topics such as those raised by Daly about women and the Church are commonplace discussion in the Church today, little in the sacramental life of the Catholic Church (the official position of which remains as it has been for hundreds of years) has changed regarding the understanding and rôle of women. See Jean Paul II's recent encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) for evidence of this.

the movement to equality between women and men was anathema[20] to the Church hierarchy who resisted and opposed any change to the status of women within the Church.

> Those engaged in the struggle for the equality of the sexes have often seen the Catholic Church as an enemy. This view is to a large extent justified, for Catholic teaching has prolonged a traditional view of woman which at the same time idealizes and humiliates her.[21]

Informed as her work was by Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex,[22] her writing took on much of de Beauvoir's critique of the socio-ontological arrangements which constitute, encompass and entrap women. Indeed, Daly's book can be seen as a Catholic response to de Beauvoir's critique of the Catholic Church's oppression of women. Daly, however, was keen to make a case for transcending the history and social circumstances of women in the Church and to argue for some optimistic outcomes once the problems were identified and acknowledged.

> The fundamental difference between Simone de Beauvoir's vision of the Church and women and that which motivated this book is the difference between despair and hope. For this reason our approach is fundamentally far more radical than that of the French existentialist. De Beauvoir was willing to accept the conservative vision of the Church as reality, and therefore has had to reject it as unworthy of mature humanity. However, there is an alternative to rejection, an alternative which need not involve self-mutilation. This is commitment to radical transformation of the negative, life-destroying elements of the Church as it exists today. The possibility of such commitment rests upon clear understanding that the seeds of the eschatological community, of the liberating humanizing Church of the future, are already present, however submerged and neutralized they may be. Such commitment requires hope and courage.[23]

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[20] Although I have used the past tense here, this remains true of Catholic hierarchy and many devout men (and some women) Catholics. Arguments against ordination of women to the Catholic priesthood for example are based upon an assumed inferiority of women developed from Pauline texts in particular. The "equal but different" sentiments which condemn women to lesser positions in the Church is also an example of this.

[21] op. cit., Daly, The Church and the Second Sex, p. 53.

[22] Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (trans. H. M. Parshley) (Picador Books, London, 1949).

[23] op. cit., Daly, The Church and the Second Sex, p. 221.

Daly could, therefore, be seen as an apologist for the Truth which she believed the Catholic Church manifested and revealed and this is in direct opposition to de Beauvoir.[24] However, there is a significant and fundamental point on which both de Beauvoir and Daly agree. Like de Beauvoir,[25] Daly attacked the essentialising notion of the Eternal Feminine, the Eternal Woman, the idea of the essential Woman to which I referred in chapter 1, that there is a "fixed human nature",[26] peculiar to women. Unlike de Beauvoir, however, and this is what Daly's critics argue, she does not persist with her exposure, ultimately retrieving instead the idealised myth of Goddess which she then uses as the projected foundation for a possible gynocracy or rule of women by women. On this view, Daly revalorises and re-inscribes the Eternal Feminine in Gyn/Ecology and Pure Lust and this is why she is accused of essentialism.

In The Church and the Second Sex Daly's contention is that the Eternal Woman is the essential woman: she is what it is that makes a woman truly a woman; she personifies the Eternal Feminine. In terms of my earlier analysis, the eternal woman is Locke's real essence and the Aristotelian adopted Pythagorean negation of the positive man. According to Daly:

> The characteristics of the Eternal Woman are opposed to those of a developing, authentic *person,* who will be unique, self-critical, self creating, active and searching. . . By contrast to these authentic personal qualities, the Eternal Woman is said to have a vocation to surrender and hiddenness; . . . Self-less, she achieves not individual realisation but merely generic fulfillment in motherhood, physical or spiritual. . . She is said to be timeless and conservative by nature. She is shrouded in mystery because she is not a genuine human person . . .[27]

The Eternal Feminine is the symbol which is at the heart of the Eternal Woman, itself a symbolic representation. The Eternal Feminine and the Eternal Woman are, as I

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[24] In the Post Christian Introduction to The Church and the Second Sex, Daly speaks of the position she had taken in the first edition in terms of dis-ownership. That is to say, she speaks of herself in the third person, dissociating from and critiquing the views of the earlier Daly.

[25] See de Beauvoir, op. cit., The Second Sex, Part III, in particular her discussion of the Mother and the Virgin Mary, pp. 170ff. It is beyond the scope of this thesis however, to explore in great depth, the relationship between de Beauvoir's work and Daly's.

[26] op. cit., Daly, The Church and the Second Sex, p. 70.

[27] ibid.

read Daly,[28] symbols which operate at a normative level in society.[29] Hence, the concepts of the Eternal Woman and the Eternal Feminine, although symbolic, are not merely descriptive. They prescribe how a woman ought to behave in order to count as a woman. These symbols are "radically opposed to female emancipation"[30] for they evince a perception of women that both describes and prescribes their individual natures. On this view, symbolic Woman is naturally "passive, dependent, totally relational"[31] and she provides the ideal to which individual women should conform. The relationship between the symbolic Eternal Woman and individual women is mediated by a symbol which says what it means to be a woman: to be a woman is to embody the Eternal Feminine, to conform to the Eternal Woman. Anything falling outside this model fails to count as a woman. The Eternal Feminine is, in other words, the essence of Woman and individual women: "The formula is very simple: once the *a priori* norms of femininity have been set up, all the exceptions are classified as 'de-feminised'".[32] Note the relationship, reminiscent of Aristotle and Plato, between the idea of universal Woman and individual women: one is an individual woman in virtue of participating in the ideal form of Woman.

Daly contended that the Eternal Feminine is the enemy of women who seek freedom and personhood. Its immutability, restrictiveness and prescriptiveness ensure that women will remain within narrow social rôles, for the rôles which women perform in society are contingent upon how a society understands what a woman should *be*, and should *be like*. This has been reinforced by Christian dogma and tradition. Hence the characteristics of the Eternal Feminine tie women to, for example, motherhood, nurturing, mystery, on the one hand and, importantly, to inferiority and the image of the temptress

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[28] What follows is my re-construction of the relationship between the Eternal Feminine, the Eternal Woman and individual women.

[29] op. cit., Daly, The Church and the Second Sex, p. 70.

[30] ibid.

[31] ibid., p.172.

[32] ibid., p.155.

on the other.[33] Women's alleged inferiority has developed because of the literal translation from the symbolic and theoretical (the Eternal Feminine) to the actual (particular women).

Thus, biblical accounts of woman's secondary place in creation, her instigation of human evil and her association with the flesh, have circumscribed the rôles of all women strictly in terms of their biological, moral and emotional capacities.[34] On this view, biology traps women because of the way in which it is interpreted. Biological considerations lead necessarily to normative accounts of women's behaviour. The idea that biology/nature is a 'fixed category' open to differing interpretations which embody "different cultural meanings and values",[35] Grosz's reading of constructionism, is pertinent here.

As I read Daly, she is arguing that in a strong sense individual women derive 'that they are women' from an account of symbolic womanhood which she equates with the 'Eternal Feminine', predicated on an idea of 'pure' or 'brute' biology and nature. The Eternal Feminine is a gender construct; women's sex remains a biological brute fact. This interpretation of her reading the Eternal Feminine as a gender construct, returns later in her analysis of Be-ing as we shall shortly see. Daly saw the Eternal Feminine as an evil which should be exorcised from the Church as well as from the lives of women. While the grip of the Eternal Feminine persisted, little could be achieved for women. Daly's was, to use a phrase of Grosz's, a project designed "to minimise biological differences"[36] to change how, and the conditions under which, women should be symbolised.[37]

It is important to acknowledge that Daly was then concerned for women to remain **within** the Church and that, as I noted above, she believed it would be possible to transform the Church into the kind of institution in which women would have equality. The

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[33] Daly never 'defines' the feminine as such. She seems to assume an explicit understanding of the feminine, whilst at the same time, hinting at what it might be like. The feminine, woman and women are closely related physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually, but she operates with a concepts of sex and gender as distinct categories, even in her extensive analysis.

[34] op. cit., Daly, The Church and the Second Sex, pp. 75 - 76.

[35] Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism (Allen & Unwin, St. Leonard's 1994), p. 17.

[36] ibid.

[37] See in particular, Daly's chapters, "Demon of Sexual Prejudice: Exercise in Exorcism" and "Roots of the Problem: Radical Surgery Required" in op. cit., The Church and the Second Sex, pp. 166 - 191.

last two chapters of The Church and the Second Sex are concerned with "some modest proposals" about how this might come about. Daly's optimism witnesses her belief in the liberal feminist commitment to full participation in the pre-established (sex-neutral) forms of hierarchical institutions. For her, acceptance of women as equal partners in the Church will lead to the transformation of the institution itself in which:

> . . . (m)en and women, using their best talents, forgetful of self and intent upon the work, will with God's help mount together toward a higher order of consciousness and being, in which the alienating projections will have been defeated and wholeness, psychic integrity, achieved.[38]

For her, that meant that both women and men must abandon the dominant image of women as the embodiment of the Eternal Feminine. In turn, that meant the traditional rôles ascribed to women (in which the Eternal Feminine is honoured) will need to be re-evaluated so that women can be given the freedom to move into new space(s). Daly contended that men also must go through a process of transformation and come to terms with the ways in which society had imposed values on, and expectations of, them. "The eternal masculine" traps and limits men as much as the Eternal Feminine has women.

> What is more the 'eternal masculine' itself is alienating, crippling the personalities of men and restricting their experience of life at every level. The male in our society is not supposed to express much feeling, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation, imagination, consideration for others, intuition. He is expected to affirm only part of his real self. Indeed, it may be that a good deal of the compulsive competitiveness of males is rooted in this half existence. . . . It is the nature of the disease, therefore, to inhibit the expansion of the individual's potential, through conditioned conformity to roles, and through a total identification of the individual with them.[39]

Although at the time of writing The Church and the Second Sex Daly's primary concern was with the liberation of women from archaic theory and social practice built upon that theory, her concern was also for the liberation of **all** humans, women and men alike. She believed that women and men must transcend the boundaries of their socially

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38 ibid., p. 223.

39 ibid., pp. 193 - 194.

acquired stereotypes, that the 'real'[40] self somehow exists apart from sexual identity. She takes up this theme in Beyond God the Father, where she was concerned to explore notions centred around androgynous being[41] which she later abandoned and disclaimed.

In Beyond God the Father Daly begets a trinity: language, its uses and meanings, transcendence and androgyny.[42] The relationship between these three is always implicit: together they produce the ontological foundations for human becoming to ultimate, authentic Be-ing. What I want to emphasise here, is that regardless of what patriarchal intellectual commitments Daly attacks and attempts to refute, her underlying commitment to women's liberation remains couched in terms of language and ontology which are themselves patriarchal. Yet, ironically, Daly simultaneously **rejects** patriarchal language and ontology because of their de-valorising of women. Overwhelmingly, the language/ontology relation is what she appropriates and exploits to make political statements, to address what she considers to be socially and morally corrupt practices, and to redefine the enterprises of theology and philosophy.

This relation between language and ontology saturates Gyn/Ecology and Pure Lust, the works in which Daly develops her cosmic odyssey, her gynocratic vision. These are also works which have caused outcries from many feminists, who have complained bitterly of Daly's Euro-centrism, her failure to acknowledge the cultures and experiences of a broad range of women (reading her as making universalising statements about women) and her alienation of women who are not woman-identified and therefore not 'real' women as she would have it (the fembots and Painted Birds for example).[43]

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[40] Throughout this thesis where the term 'reality' is obviously contested, I use single quotes. Where it is not necessarily contested, I omit the quotes.

[41] See Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Beacon Press, Boston, 1973), *passim.*

[42] In the preface to Gyn/Ecology, Daly says that along with the terms 'God' and 'homosexuality','androgyny' is a term she will never use again. See Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (The Women's Press, London, 1979), pp. xi ff.

[43] See for example Audre Lorde,"An Open Letter to Mary Daly" in Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Crossing Press, Trumansberg, NY, 1984); op. cit., Morris, "A-mazing Grace" *passim*; Hester Eisenstein, Contemporary Feminist Thought (G. Allen & Unwin, London, 1984); op. cit., Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance; Jill Matthews, "Review of Gyn/Ecology" in Gay Information, 5 (1981) pp. 18 - 19.

As a preliminary gesture in the recovery/discovery of language and, I would argue, its use as discourse, Daly in Beyond God the Father, had denounced the practice of naming. She argued that what she calls "old naming" as a function of language, has assumed an oppressive rôle within, and is constitutive of, patriarchal structures including discursive practice(s). So, Daly believed, "new naming" can creatively constitute a world in which all sexual oppression will disappear.

> In order to understand the implications of this process it is necessary to grasp the fundamental fact that women have had the power of *naming* stolen from us. We have not been free to use their own power to name themselves, the world, or God. The old naming was not the product of dialogue - a fact inadvertently admitted in the Genesis story of Adam's naming the animals and the woman. Women are now realising that the universal imposing of names by men has been false because partial. . . To exist humanly is to name the self, the world and God . . .[44]

Daly's implicit social constructionism is evident here. She perceives that language constitutes social constructionist practices and rigorously claims language as the site of transformation for women. But I suggest that in taking this line, Daly resurrects the divide between nature and nurture, between sex and gender, body and mind. On this reading it is interpretation of, for example underlying biology, that is at fault, not the idea that one makes conceptual distinctions.

Daly understands language as a whole, as a dialogical, transformative means of achieving a radically altered society in which women will have restored to them, their autonomy and authenticity as human beings.[45] On this basis, Morris' claim about Daly's subverting use of isolated signs is dubious. On the other hand, Daly asserts that the dualistic structures which constitute oppression and are the outcome and basis of, patriarchal society, ought to be transcended in favour of androgynous be-ing or psychic wholeness. This assertion is questionable considering her inadvertent retention of the distinction between body and mind, sex and gender.

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[44] op. cit., Daly, Beyond God the Father, p. 8.

[45] This point is reinforced in Pure Lust. See "On Lust and the Lusty", *passim*.

In Beyond God the Father, Daly's ideal world of female becoming[46] is presented as one free of sex-discrimination in which all women and men have transcended "the eternal essence" in which patriarchal society has erroneously cast them. By taking command of language, claiming the right to name for themselves, women will retrieve what has been lost to and through patriarchy: the right to self definition, to Be-ing. But in taking this stance, Daly courts essentialism, not merely on the grounds of distinguishing between sex and gender, but because she appears to invoke notions of an essential female gender. How does she do this?

Daly and Essentialism

Language and Ontology

The power of naming, highlighted in Beyond God the Father, is a crucial feature of Daly's work in Gyn/Ecology and by the time of Pure Lust had developed into a highly sophisticated network of critical exploration of language, play on words, neologism, and re-definition. In terms of the kinds of images and emphases which Daly employs however, it is disputable that she had abandoned her vitriolic attack on the Eternal Feminine. It is possible to read these newer works as a valorisation of the Eternal Feminine, her language interpreting and reinforcing this possibility. For example, she speaks of women's bodies as "transmutable to and from energy" and of "(t)he spiration of the Archimage within Lusty women, who speak women's words, heals broken connections between words and their Sources, reconnecting women with their elemental origins . . ."[47] acknowledging, it would seem, some implicit and uncritical notion of what it means to be a woman in terms of their embodiment. But she also consistently maintains that one

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[46] In Beyond God the Father, Daly is very taken by process theology in part because it does not present us with a static world view. She obviously admires the work of Charles Hartshorne, who, she says, believes that "process is creative synthesis" (p. 188). But she is dubious about the social worth of theory such as his; and is also suspicious of theory which is ready made (man-made) and which seems can be readily appropriated by feminists. Her enterprise is to make new philosophy and create new language out of the experience(s) of women. "The essential thing is to hear our *own* words, always giving prior attention to our *own* experience, never letting prefabricated theory have *authority* over us. Then we can be free to listen to the old philosophical language (and all philosophy that does not explicitly repudiate sexism is old, no matter how novel it may seem)", p. 189.

[47] ibid., p. 91.

ought to reject the forms of feminisation imposed by patriarchal society and against which she had formerly argued. Those forms distort women and are responsible for producing 'fembots' and 'Painted Birds'. Undoubtedly, there is a distinct tension between the two readings of Daly. How one can resolve this dilemma, depends on how one interprets Daly's project in Pure Lust in particular. I shall return to this point shortly.

The Wickedary which she (along with Jane Caputi) published in 1987, is an encyclopædic review of her adventures into language and discourse. This book signposts the cosmic voyage[48] she has made through and with language and is an exciting, humorous and methodical exposition of the networks or webs of words and word patterns she has created over the past twenty plus years. She identifies naming as a functional process which can oppress (as it has women) or liberate, and argues that naming oppresses when it is not freely created - in dialogue - by communities acting in the interests of all their members, to achieve transcendence. Naming - language as an activity which implies, and is implied by, discourse - is a prime mover in both the construction and understanding of Being.

Daly argues that all language establishes and comes out of an ontologically committed context.[49] In that she is not alone. The concerns of Scott, de Lauretis, Fuss and Spelman highlight this. Until the Wickedary, she is never clear about what **she** means[50] precisely by 'ontology' and its cognates. However, in the Wickedary she talks of elemental ontology, "the philosophical quest for Be-ing; rooted in the intuition that Powers of Be-ing are constantly Unfolding, creating, communicating; philosophy grounded in the experience of active potency to move beyond the foreground of fixed questions and

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[48] op. cit., Daly, the Wickedary.

[49] See for example, her discussion of titles and rôles within a workplace context: 'In women one notices "accommodation attitudes," that is, a self-abnegating and flattering manner that is almost "second nature." Conditioning to such accommodation attitudes is intensified by such customs as nonreciprocal first naming, common even when the boss (Mr. Jones, Father Jones, Professor Jones or Doctor Jones) is thirty years of age and the secretary, who is sixty, is called "Sally." A similar custom is reference by "the boss" to "Sally" as "the girl" in the office. A young male "executive assistant" doing essentially the same work as Sally, for a much higher salary, is of course not referred to as a "boy."' See op. cit., Daly, Beyond God the Father, p. 136.

[50] Daly's meanings, of course, can never be guaranteed to take on the meanings of accepted patriarchal usage and this, I would argue, is instrumental to her ontological-linguistic strategy.

answers and enter the Radiant Realms of Metabeing".[51] That she believes there is an intimate relation between language and ontology which is fundamental to her work is evident here. Her term 'Meta-being', "(r)ealms of active participation in Powers of Be-ing, State of Ecstasy" is intended to convey the lack of disjunction between discourse and be-ing. For her Be-ing, "Ultimate/Intimate Reality, the constantly Unfolding Verb of Verbs which is intransitive, having no object that limits its dynamism; the Final Cause, the Good who is Self-communicating who is the Verb from whom, in whom and with whom all true movements move",[52] is a kind of all embracing presence which is not yet.

Daly's Platonic/Aristotelian influence[53] should not be gainsaid in her analysis of the Eternal Woman. Her articulation of Be-ing; and her maintaining that be-ing is "actual participation"[54] in Be-ing, echoes this. What is clear is that the philosophical influences on Daly constitute a space from which her tireless deconstruction/reconstruction of masculine language emerges. Also at play is an Heracleitan resonance which stresses language as primarily "performative/active/animate" activity, potentially alive with meaning. It is in this context that we should read her emphasis on Verbs.

It is apparent that Daly is cavalier about her adoption of philosophical systems, using them as befits her own new and originary radical feminist philosophy. Thus her distinctions (although often refigured) between Be-ing, be-ing and Be-coming, God the Noun and God the Verb, her use of the concepts of authenticity, Otherness, erasure, deferral, false consciousness to name but a few, are often left unattributed to their sources (Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Process Theology, Liberation Theology for example).The point is that Daly is selective in what she wants to accept and reject from patriarchal systems. Her creativity arises not in spite of, but because of, those systems.

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51 op. cit., Daly, the Wickedary, p. 86.

52 ibid., p. 64.

53 The idea of participation is important for Daly. I suggest that this is derived from the Platonic conception of the relationship between an individual or particular and the relevant Universal. Accordingly, in the Platonic system, the Form (the universal) pre-exists the individual which gains its identity from participation in the universal.

54 op. cit., Daly, Beyond God the Father, p. 64.

Another significant feature of her language is that it becomes misanthropic. Daly deliberately acknowledges that language creates the supposedly sex-neutral world, which is actually the world of men, epitomised by patriarchy and its discursive practices. In so doing, she endeavours to reconstruct a women's discourse; and embeds herself deeply in a traditional problem for patriarchal metaphysicians - that of metaphysical dualism - for the world which she creates is apparently an astral world.[55] She sets up a 'system' in which the time/space women will create for themselves depends upon their ability to imaginatively develop their own inner selves (which have been denied and suppressed by patriarchal structures) as well as their own socio-political frameworks and agendas. Furthermore, that world also takes on a misogynistic character, as not all women can belong in her new Elemental Race of Women. In order to belong to that Race (to be a 'real' woman) one must reject, in total, the patriarchal identification of women. Only women can identify themselves. The use and development of a women's language is not only instrumental in this process of identification, but essential to it.

It is also important to acknowledge that a large part of the becoming of women is a becoming of origins. Daly states:

> For we are rooted, as are animals and trees, winds and seas, in the Earth's substance. Thus, when true to our Originality, we are Elemental, that is "of, relating to, or caused by great force of nature".[56]

This appeal to women's Elemental origins suggests that metaphysical dualism is not a problem for Daly. Her discussion of nominalism,[57] the classic exposition of which she rejects, for example, suggests that for her 'reality' is constructed through the interplay of words and actions and that the totality is beyond individuals. As I read Daly here, her idea of reality is 'two-layered': words overlie another 'reality' independent of those words. She exemplifies a real essence position which de Lauretis rejects in favour of nominal

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[55] See op. cit., Daly, Pure Lust, p. 3: "This Lust is in its essence astral". How does one interpret such a claim?

[56] ibid., pp. 4 - 5.

[57] I find Daly's rejection of nominalism and her commitment to social constructionism represented by her emphasis on the structure use and modification of language, perplexing. Since she uses social construction theory, one would imagine that she should read the theory as nominalist. There appears to be some ambiguity about the meaning of 'nominalist'.

essence. This is also an instance of Grosz's diagnosis of constructionism as that which retains the underlying 'reality' of brute biology and nature. Daly appears to be holding both positions when she articulates the language/origins relation.

But hers is not a simple ontological dualism, in which two separate substances are postulated. The knower and the known (her usage) participate in each other as universal/particular, known/knower which are not disjunctive presences. Where there is one, there is both.[58]

> The negation of any deep ontological Elemental, sense of creative participation of the knower and of the known in Be-ing, whether this negation is called "nominalism" or "modern realism" or simply "science," is indeed emptying out of big - that is meaning-full - words . . . . Their Metaphoric powers which characterize them as Metaphoric messengers of Metabeing, are suffocated. They become embodiments of that glut which we recognize as *presence of absence.* [her italics][59]

That is not to say though that Daly articulates a view of reality conceived totally within the domain of language. Were this the case, her argument against nominalism - based upon Tillich's assessment that "Even the empiricist must acknowledge that everything approachable by knowledge must have the structure of being knowable"[60] would fail because she would be imputing the very idea she disavows: that general terms "have no objective real existence".[61] But she appears to hold that language and 'reality' participate in each other while remaining separable. The key phrase for her is 'participation', which she does not elaborate. The nature of participation is elusive, but highlights "the force of words".[62] Consciousness of the force of words provides the basis for a change in consciousness which will precipitate new naming, women's naming.

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58 op. cit., Daly, Pure Lust, pp. 160 - 161.

59 ibid., p. 162.

60 ibid., p. 177. Daly quotes from Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1951-63).

61 op. cit., Daly, Pure Lust, p. 161.

62 ibid., p. 162.

Daly argues that "(e)lemental philosophy is not compatible with nominalism and its claim that only the individual has reality, for this negates participation".[63] For Daly, it would seem that in order for general terms and particular terms to participate with each other, each must be 'real', independent of language. The medium through which this happens is language and that is why language is so ontologically potent. Access to the 'reality' underlying general and particular terms depends upon who is doing the articulating, and this is why women need to develop their own language. Language is as important as what it represents and women need to represent themselves.

According to Daly, patriarchal language, men's language, which is supposedly neutral, is hegemonic, and women must make now their own women's knowledge which is both mediated and constructed by women's language(s) and experiences(s) of underlying 'reality'. According to her, language is not sex-neutral. The ontological foundations for language and discourse in patriarchal discursive structures and practice are those which interpret and represent the interests of men. These ought to be abandoned by women for their own sex-specific language/discourse. Women's interests will be represented by a sex-specific women's language/discourse which is yet to be. Daly attempts to make a women's discourse and this is a fundamental if not **the** fundamental feature of her work.

For the rest of this chapter, I shall be arguing that from Gyn/Ecology onwards, language quite explicitly *becomes* ontology in terms of its expressing Daly's Elemental ontology, a sex-specific women's discourse. Thus I will be arguing, *contra* Morris, that Daly's strategy involves more than isolating some signs (even if this had been the case in Gyn/Ecology), and that she is explicitly committed to transforming discourse in an endeavour to create a space for women, discursively and ontologically. Hence hers is subversive linguistic activity to which we should attend because it occupies the space between saying and not saying. By this, I mean that her strategy implies quite the opposite of a literal reading, understanding and interpretation. She of necessity must use the master discursive framework of patriarchal philosophy, whilst employing metaphor

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[63] ibid.

and analogy to displace the contents and framework itself, in order to unsay what has been said of women.[64]

The implication of this for Daly, is that the unfolding of Be-ing is always slightly off-centre. There is never the security of a straightforwardly referential context, with a promise of truth delivered through literal interpretation. Instead, the dominant metaphors carry the uncertainties and opacities of women's be-ing which is never quite bounded or complete. In this way, Daly's metaphor is close to the associative qualities of the female elaborated in the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, although this time those qualities are valorised. The production of be-ing is grounded in displacing patriarchal meanings, in appropriating language, acknowledging becoming. This in turn produces be-ing which participates in Be-ing. Hence a women's ontology is possible only in so far as discourse produces the meanings out of extant discourse. Mark C. Taylor argues:

> While philosophy's other always slips through the structures imposed by conceptual reflection, the unthought can only be evoked through the language of philosophy itself. The postphilosophical thinkers must strategically use language *against* language. "In order to make the attempt of thinking recognizable and at the same time understandable for existing philosophy, it could at first be expressed only within the horizon of that existing philosophy and its use of current terms."[65]

To this extent, language and its use (discourse) is ontology: it is in language that be-ing becomes. If there is a choice to be made with respect to deciding how the language of philosophy should be used, then Daly has chosen. She has decided to use language against language: to look at its etymological foundations, use them, abuse them, draw out their implications for women and, echoing Heidegger, do that within the horizon of existing

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64 Nancy Fraser, discussing Foucault's work, also makes this point. She says: "Now, the fact that Foucault continues to speak (or at least to murmur) the language of humanism need not be held against him. Every good Derridean will allow that there is not, at least for the time being, any other language he could speak. . . . Foucault himself acknowledges that he cannot simply and straightforwardly discard at will the normative associations with the metaphysics of subjectivity". See Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory (Polity Press, Cambridge UK, 1989), p. 57.

65 Taylor's comment occurs in discussion of Heidegger in Mark C. Taylor, "Cleaving. Martin Heidegger", in AltΔrity (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987), pp. 42-43. In response to the interjector at the 'Daly event' in Sydney in 1981, I would cite a claim such as this. Given that one grows up in a culture, how else can one speak except within its terms? Daly is challenging this and attempting to dissipate (a little) the boundaries. See also, Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism", in Basic Works (trans. & ed. D. Krell) (Harper & Row, New York, 1977), p. 235.

philosophical discourse. She is therefore engaged in a double project: exploring the present/past terrain of philosophy, whilst at the same time shifting the boundaries it imposes on itself and in particular upon women. As I have already implied, it is in this context that her supposed essentialism comes to light. The subverting of discourse is a strategy Daly deliberately embraces in order to interrogate essentialism, not in order to re-inscribe or valorise the Eternal Feminine. Hers is a political task which depends upon undermining language and ultimately the canons of Western philosophy.

Language as Ontology: Daly as Essentialist?

Implicit in Daly's work is the assumption that women are embodied. Yet Daly does not speak of female embodiment at all. I remarked in chapter 1 that Grosz identified biologism and naturalism as two forms of essentialism. Daly does not question that women are embodied or that there might be some way of theorising bodies conceived as natural. The development of her discourse depends upon the assumption that women are embodied in unique ways. Because Daly does not suggest the nature of the relationship between women, their bodies and discourse, she leaves herself open to charges of essentialism. Here, I will concentrate on explaining Daly's ontological and linguistic concerns. But these cannot be understood without noting that they rest upon the idea of female embodiment.

I begin with a short quotation from Beyond God the Father:

> Why indeed must "God" be a noun? Why not a verb - the most active and dynamic of all? Hasn't the naming of "God" as a noun been an act of murdering that dynamic Verb? And isn't the Verb infinitely more personal than a mere static noun? The anthropomorphic symbols for God may be intended to convey personality, but they fail to convey that God is Be-ing. . . . This Verb - the Verb of Verbs - is intransitive. It need not be conceived as having an object that limits its dynamism . . .[66]

Daly's concern with the term 'God' as a noun is not simply grammatical. 'God' either as a proper name or as a mere noun poses a problem for Daly because of her onto-theological concerns and mistrusts. That is to say, Daly ultimately refuses the androcentric term 'God', preferring instead 'Goddess'. It is partly making God into a fixed

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[66] ibid., pp. 33 - 34.

definable thing, **reification**, that she finds objectionable. Be-ing, with which she identifies the Goddess, is not a thing at all. In reifying, in making things into objects when that should not be the case, one misses the essential nature of the Divine: that it is not to be contained as nouns contain. (This is what patriarchy practices. Witness Daly's claim that 'God' "represents the necrophilia of patriarchy").[67] She argues that reification is a masculine engagement with which she refuses to identify. According to her, the term 'God' and what it represents is irredeemably masculine, thus her rejection of it. Daly also acknowledges the possibility of falling into the trap of reifying the Goddess, making it of the same ilk as God. But for her, 'Goddess', properly used "affirms the life-loving be-ing of women and nature"[68] and is the embodiment of the Verb of verbs. Consequently, the metaphorical use of the term should not be overlooked. As I read Daly, the Goddess is a metaphor which mirrors women's transcendence, articulated as women's be-ing. The articulation of women's be-ing means that one engages with the whole of language and its use as well as acknowledging that women are embodied. This is a projection theory *par excellence.* Recall that for her, women become, just as the Goddess is the becoming of women. The Goddess is the mirror of all that women can be, an idealised projection.

Hence I am arguing that to take a piecemeal approach to Daly's general thesis is to interpret her as Morris does: as someone engaged in isolating the function of some signs, without attending to discourse, to language in use and in particular, without attending to the weight she gives to verbs which she perceives as having a deeply de-stabilising affect on language as a whole. It is to ignore Daly's insistence on refusing to reify Be-ing in relation to the concept 'Goddess' and it fails to acknowledge the implicit relation between ontology and language, the foundation of which is female embodiment.

In refiguring the Divine, concentrating on what I shall call the verbness of Be-ing, Daly is following a long theological tradition which situates discourse in ontology and ontology in discourse.

The Old Testament story of the revelation of the Divine Name is enshrouded in cosmic mystery and linguistic difficulties.

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67 op. cit., Daly, Gyn/Ecology, p. xi.

68 ibid.

> Moses then said to God, 'Look, if I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you," and they say to me, "What is his name?" what am I to tell them?' God said to Moses, 'I am he who is.' And he said, 'This is what you are to say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you." ' God further said to Moses, 'You are to tell the Israelites, "Yahweh, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you." This is my name for all time, and thus I am to be invoked for all generations to come . . .[69]

Commentators on this biblical passage point out that there are etymological and interpretative worries concerning the text, both of which currently have bearing on Daly's concerns. Etymologically, they argue, *Yahweh* is archaically related to the Hebrew verb 'to be'. But they also acknowledge that it may be the causative 'he causes to be' or 'he brings into existence.'[70] In any case, the emphasis is on the activity (being and/or causing) of what is signified by the word. The interpretational question is, in part, one of how the word functions for it apparently has a naming rôle.[71] What is pertinent for us is that the naming takes place through the use of the present indicative (a verb function), not through the isolation of properties, characteristics or features (a noun function in terms of modification and qualification). In other words, God's pronouncement, 'I am he who is', if we do take it to be a case of naming, is a verb-naming rather than a noun-naming. Needless to say, its origins and the rules of Hebrew grammar indicate that it is tied up with the verb 'to be' and hence is revelatory of God's Being (as Being).[72] Verb-naming according to Daly seeks not to reify, but to characterise God as active principle, as elemental, which is precisely what is happening in this Hebrew text.

It is arguable that Daly's insistence on the anthropomorphising of God (in her early works and her rejection of the term in her later) by noun-name limitation had already been anticipated within a system that was undeniably patriarchal, a system which, married to Greek philosophy, gave birth to the philosophical iniquities of Christianity as she sees it.

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69 *Exodus* 3:13-15, in The New Jerusalem Bible, (Doubleday, New York, 1985).

70 ibid., footnote g., p. 85.

71 In the footnotes, the translators discuss the question of whether or not the intention of God is to give his name. They assume (not argue) that he does intend so doing and that is the context in which I am writing.

72 op. cit., *Exodus*, footnote g.

The Hebrew story exhibits a deep religious bias towards acknowledging the Be-ing and mystery of divinity which falls outside the usual noun-naming processes. So, in identifying noun-naming as a problem for 'God', Daly reiterates part of a tradition which can usefully be put to work in a feminist theology.[73]

The impetus for producing a peculiarly women's discourse lies precisely in theological quandaries such as that represented by the Yahweh debate. Daly's discourse relies on excursions to the origins of terms within language as well as parody, punning and innuendo. Daly uncovers the prejudice towards anthropomorphism which she maintains patriarchal use/discourse displays in its theological language. She realises that language constitutes our understandings and conceptualisings, particularly because many of our concepts are 'trapped' in nouns. By 'playing around'[74] with language, her intention is to create not only a conceptual shift, but an ontological shift: a shift that will make possible the discovery of the Goddess as a projection in the experience of women.

But this realisation brings with it a problem: How does one construct women's discourse? Daly's attribution (to women) of all that is good, of women's biophilic (life loving) tendencies and her wholesale adoption of a model of women which embraces any woman who seeks self-identification and total rejection of patriarchal models, immediately appears to be essentialising. This is especially so when one considers that female embodiment is the site for such conceptualisations. By this, I mean that Daly seems to be operating with a concept of woman which contains its own imperatives for woman-ness, embodied women-ness. This concept is prescriptive. Women's bodies - the bodies of fembots and Painted Birds - are painted to please men and ought not be, and should not be thought of as the bodies of 'real' women.

Both Gyn/Ecology and Pure Lust describe women in terms which deny the attribution of dependence, inferiority, irrationality and lack of identity to women. They speak of women as strong, independent, life giving and life loving, intimately related to the earth, women's secret pasts in the Goddess traditions of various cultures, fecund, spiralling, spinning, with a deeply symbolic cosmic presence. Yet these are earmarks of

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[73] She actually has taken up this suggestion from the Hermeneutic theologians.

[74] I do mean 'playing around'. Much of her writing is a joyful playing with concepts, ideas, etymologies and breaking up of syllables to re-emphasise new and different meanings.

feminist essentialism as I argued in chapter 1 and provide further grounds for interpreting Daly as an essentialist philosopher/theologian.

Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, reads Daly as a philosopher concerned with articulating a feminine alterity, as postulating a feminine essence which valorises the maternal feminine. She says that Daly:

> . . . brilliantly . . . uses an ontological-linguistic strategy to articulate such an alterity. It is a process of Be-coming instantiated by the Wild, Original, Self-actualizing woman who has made the leap from phallocracy into freedom, into the Other-world of Be-ing.[75]

Schüssler Fiorenza argues that Daly's attempts to articulate a feminine alterity simply re-inscribe patriarchal constructions of dualistic thinking: that Woman and the feminine are to be valorised as natural categories over and against Man and the masculine. She describes Daly's position as just one of the many which come "dangerously close to reproducing in the form of deconstructive language traditional cultural-religious ascription[s] of femininity and motherhood, ascriptions all too familiar from papal pronouncements which have now become feminist norms".[76]

Rosi Braidotti also maintains that Daly has a "conceptual tendency to naturalize the feminine".[77] Braidotti's case against Daly stems from her analysis of Daly's Goddess imagery which she maintains merely puts a female concept of the Divine in the place of a male concept. She agrees with Morris whom she reads as accusing Daly of "re-naming at the level of lexicon, of the vocabulary, leaving unchanged the syntax of representation".[78] Morris writes:

> . . . one focus of Daly's interest in Gyn/Ecology is the possibilities offered by changing *particular words* (those items in the dictionary, i.e. the available code - or *langue* - of patriarchal English). She de-constructs and de-forms them in their inert state as signs whose only context *is* the dictionary, and then puts them to work in the discourse. . . . Her strategy

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75 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 106.

76 ibid., p. 107.

77 op. cit., Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, p. 206.

78 ibid.

> is to warp the words of the patriarchal dictionary, to bend the code back against itself until it snaps to their shrieks of derision. [her italics][79]

Braidotti does not suggest what it might mean to change the syntax of representation, nor what indeed the 'syntax of representation' itself is.[80] If she means the way in which words are used, the product of a speaking position (Morris' characterisation of 'discourse'),[81] not just their meanings - that is if she means that Daly re-inscribes rather than changes the master language of philosophy about which Braidotti later speaks[82] - then I would argue that she has misread Daly's project (as has Morris). On the Morris/Braidotti reading, the syntax of representation would remain the same, but the terms in which it is expressed change. Hence Braidotti claims:

> So Daly falls into what I consider one of the worst traps besetting feminism today: the replacement of the masculine subject by the feminine subject. . . . The latent dogmatism in Daly's thought, quite as much as its reactionary nature, seems to me potentially dangerous for current feminism, insofar as it subverts the signs, not the codes.[83]

The point is that this interpretation says that Daly's (supposed) essentialist stance persists because she deconstructs terms within language, without deconstructing the corpus, language in use, and her own speaking position. On this reading, Daly valorises Woman as she has been understood through the texts of Western philosophy, ascribing to Woman an essence which depends upon the implicit acceptance of the categories of Western thought. Her ontological-linguistic strategy - her language/discourse which instantiates the be-ing of women - carries with it the prejudices and assumptions which have always been made about women and which have rendered her Other of/to man.

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79 op. cit., Morris, "A-mazing Grace", p. 72.

80 But I assume she means devices such as Lacan's crossing out 'the' before Woman ('~~the~~ Woman'). See Morris' discussion "Digression on Discourse", in op. cit., A-mazing Grace, pp. 74-78. See also, Jacques Lacan, Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the *École Freudienne* (Juliet Mitchell & Jacqueline Rose, eds.) (trans. Jacqueline Rose) (Macmillan, London, 1982).

81 ibid., p. 77.

82 op. cit., Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, pp. 209-218.

83 ibid., p. 207.

Woman's alterity, far from being interrogated, is cast in a problematic women-speak of isolated terms and signs.

I deem this very important for two reasons. Firstly, if it were the case that Daly re-valorises woman and the feminine[84] as they have been articulated through the philosophical canon because she is involved in isolating signs without attending to discourse, then her work would not have the profoundly disturbing effect which I read it as having and which other commentators lead me to believe it has. Can one subvert individual signs without subverting the code (and Daly subverts **so many** signs)? Her construction of the Wickedary (a guide to metapatriarchal discourse[85]) depends upon recognising that an implicit female genealogy already exists, albeit hidden. The discourse to express the genealogy is yet to exist because men (and their patriarchal thinking) have dominated, if not almost totally constituted, philosophical thinking and its discourse. As we will see this is an idea taken up by Irigaray in her work.[86]

Of course it could be claimed that Daly's work is disturbing because of its alleged reactionary nature and latent dogmatism as Braidotti suggests. However, this fails to acknowledge what Daly is attempting to do through her use of metaphor and this is my second reason for attending to the Morris/Braidotti critique.

> A metapatriarchal metaphor "works" precisely to the extent that it carries a woman further into the Wild dimensions of other-centered consciousness - out of the dead circles into Spiralling/Spinning motion. Be-witching metaphors transmute the shapes of perception. They do this by jarring images, stirring memories, accentuating contradictions, upsetting unconscious traditional assumptions, evoking "inappropriate" laughter, releasing pent-up tears, eliciting gynaesthetic sensings of

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84 Note that this is not Daly's preferred terminology at all, but the feminine is read into her work.

85 In the Wickedary, Daly notes that 'meanings of the prefix *meta-* all applicable here, are, according to *Webster's*, "occurring later," "situated behind," "change in transformation of," and "beyond, transcending"', p. xiii. The making of meta-patriarchal discourse is what I take her to be doing.

86 Daly notes that the Wickedary "is an entirely New Work. At the same Time, it is Ancient/Archaic". op. cit., Wickedary, p. xv. I see Daly's project here as analogous to Luce Irigaray's proposal that women need their own genealogy. See Luce Irigaray, Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (Columbia University Press, New York, 1991); and Luce Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (Columbia University Press, New York, 1993).

> connections, arousing Dragon-identified Passions, inspiring acts of Volcanic virtue, brewing strange ideas.[87]

I am not claiming that one cannot be reactionary or dogmatic if one uses metaphor. What I am claiming on Daly's behalf is that her declared use of metaphor circumvents a literal interpretation of her work to the extent that one cannot conclusively argue that she is either reactionary or dogmatic. Her tongue in cheek tone parodies the seriousness of men's philosophy, catching the reader off guard, wondering what Daly's meanings are. The profoundly disturbing effect of her work then, may come about because of uncertainty. Given that she claims to be anti-essentialist, how is one to read her when *prima facie* she seems to be saying one thing and simultaneously not saying it?

I suggest that Morris' and Braidotti's readings of Daly are literal. They slide across Daly's attempts to situate herself within a tradition of metaphorical discourse of which she is simultaneously subversive.[88] She alleges: "Metaphors function to Name change, and therefore they elicit change. . . . Thus the very task of naming and calling forth Elemental be-ing requires metaphors".[89] For Daly, change necessitates the use of metaphor because metaphor in metapatriarchal discourse is not disembodied, but situated in the sexed interpretations of women's bodies and their experiences.[90]

Daly's chapter "Bewitching: The Lust for Metamorphosis" in Pure Lust contains a substantial elucidation of both the rôle and stress Daly wants to place on metaphor. There she argues that metaphors are not mere symbols nor mere abstractions. There she also maintains that the Great Mother is one of the "myriad possibilities for naming transcendence" (and that some women can become fixated on images like the great Mother, an example of reification of the Goddess). If one is prepared to acknowledge the metaphorical thrust of Daly's work, and if one is prepared to admit that Daly as well as any other philosopher can work using only the philosophical lexicon and the discourse that

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87 op. cit., Daly, Pure Lust, p. 405.

88 ibid., pp.407 - 408.

89 ibid., p. 25.

90 ibid., p. 408.

engenders, then I think one ought be prepared to reconsider the accusation that Daly is an essentialist.

She is not, as I read her, re-inscribing Woman (and the feminine) at all. Rather she is using 'woman' in a metaphorical sense to theorise a woman-centred subject that actually does concede woman's difference, especially in terms of how one signifies and represents women's bodies. In other words she is using what is available in men's philosophical discourse - about women - to destabilise our ideas of woman. Hence I would place her in the tradition of the French philosophers of difference, even if Daly omits reference to, and critique of, the psychoanalytic tradition.[91] Her major themes can be redescribed in terms of some of their concerns: *jouissance*, subverting of the linguistic and discursive paradigms, establishing a female genealogy and *écriture feminine*. We will see this in my discussion of Irigaray's work in chapter 4. So I am suggesting that Daly challenges Western philosophy and denies its neutrality, its ability to speak for all humans, women and men.

Suppose therefore that it is the case, as Braidotti argues, that Daly is concerned with replacing the masculine subject with the feminine. The claim that there can be no sex-neutral subject is discussed widely in feminist literature.[92] Would Braidotti prefer the articulation of a sex-neutral subject?[93] A direct consequence of Scott's analysis of women's experience, for example, would be that experience produces subject positions which are always sexed/gendered. Let us suppose then, that there are no pre-existing subjects who experience; suppose that discursive positioning 'produces subjects'. One would imagine that woman's experience would produce 'woman-subject' just as man's experience would produce 'man-subject'. The point is that it is not a neutral subject, on this account, that is produced through discursive practices and positioning. Further, one should wonder about the rôle of the body in such an account. Is it irrelevant? Is subjectivity constituted without reference to a body? Is sexed embodiment significant in the construction of subjectivities?

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91 This is not a new point. Morris, op. cit., "A-mazing Grace", compares Daly with Irigaray.

92 See Moira Gatens,"A Critique of the Sex Gender Distinction" in Sneja Gunew (ed.) A Reader in Feminist Knowledge (Routledge, London & New York, 1991); and op. cit., Grosz, Volatile Bodies.

93 You will notice that Braidotti conflates 'subject' and 'subjectivity' in the preceding quotation.

Daly abandoned her early attempts at positing androgyny (neutrality), realising that such a concept does nothing in terms of subverting masculine, phallocentric philosophy. Her attempt to find a feminine (woman-) subject, if that is what she is doing in her work, is laudable and defensible, simply on the grounds of its ultimate denial of the supposed neutrality of discourse: that there can be no sex-neutral subject articulated in and through language. And as the argument is proceeding, a sex-neutral discourse would produce a sex-neutral divinity, an idea anathema to Daly. The idea of female embodiment necessitates the idea of female subjectivities. The question of neutrality is a very important issue to which I shall return when I discuss Luce Irigaray's work in a later chapter.

Daly's concern is with developing a metaphorical understanding of woman and divinity which is open-ended. In this sense it is worthwhile interrogating her project as non-literal and not essentialist (i.e. committed to 'real' feminine essence) at all. Language and ontology become one because they participate in each other. The idea of divinity, the Goddess, mirrors the language which interprets and represents women. Daly stresses process and possibility rather than thing and definition. The materials available for her to work with are precisely the materials of Western philosophy. This is not to revalorise either them or it, to re-inscribe the categories they assume and impose, but it is to challenge their status as fixed and Ultimate Truth (for there is only Be-ing, itself in process).

Daly, criticises what she calls "simple inversions" (the practice of deliberately misapplying terms and labels to create metaphorical representations). She wrote of essentialism:

> Particularly insidious is the pseudo-feminist usage of the term *essentialist* to label and discredit all feminist writing that dares to Name and celebrate the Wild and Elemental reality of women who choose to think beyond the prescribed parameters of patriarchal mandates. . . . The projection of the label "essentialist" on to women (Radical Feminists) who strive for Self-definition beyond the amorphous blob-concept of "human-essence"/"human nature" is typical patriarchal reversal. The projection of the accusatory label "essentialist" onto Radical Feminist thought and be-ing is not merely deceptive; it is evil. It elicits the patriarchally embedded Self-censor in women attempting to create in women-identified ways. . . In other words, the expression of Original Powers and of the Ecstatic existential experience of women breaking free from patriarchal mindbendings is stigmatized by the label "essentialist," leaving only the

> grimness of oppression as that which women have in common. Ultimately this reversal/usage functions to negate Hope for Life that transcends the illusion of inclusion in forever male-identified "humankind."[94]

The answer to the question, 'How does one construct a women's discourse?' should be seen in terms of metaphor and using men's discourse to remove oneself from, to step outside, that discourse. The charge of essentialism against Daly is an admission that one has not understood her project. While it seems immediately obvious that she is essentialist,the superficiality of that claim becomes apparent if one admits the rôle of metaphor and re-reads her work in that light.

Daly and Moral Supremacy

Recall Spelman's argument that 'woman' is not simply a sex/gender term. Sex/gender, together with class and race constitute the idea of woman. Women are therefore produced in complex socio-political structures that render them not all the same. When one speaks of women, one should always have regard for the range of factors which constitute them. One of the complaints made about Daly is that she fails to recognise these points. Her position, it is argued, is middle class and white privileged-woman centred. She does not speak to and for all women.

In light of this there are two areas I want to cover in this section: Audre Lorde's "Open Letter to Mary Daly" and Daly's alleged moral supremacism or its equal, political elitism.[95] Both of these issues are embroiled in feminist concerns about political correctness, who can and should speak for whom, who is (and ought be) included and who is (and ought not be) excluded by feminist theories and an often implicitly assumed solidarity amongst women.

Daly is not alone in facing these worries. Many feminists are caught in a double bind: if one speaks, then there is the question of just for whom and to whom one is

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94 op. cit., Daly, the Wickedary, p. 251.

95 See op. cit., Morris, "A-mazing Grace", p. 78.

speaking.[96] If one speaks for oneself or a group whom one represents, then it can be argued that one excludes large numbers of women whose views one does not countenance or which might be different from one's own. If one speaks for others, then one can be accused of universalising, or of disenfranchising, the women for whom one speaks, that in fact one ought not speak for anyone, especially if one's race, sex preference, class, religion *et alia* are different. For example, one should, as an outsider, an observer of a culture, not speak against genital mutilation[97] because the women to whom this happens are culturally, religiously and ethnically different from one's own. One's speaking can represent a supreme arrogance and often, the argument goes, might assume a deplorable cultural supremacism on one's part.[98] So that one should never refer to other women as Painted Birds or fembots, metaphorically or ironically even.

Mary Daly's speaking position has been called into question by Audre Lorde. Her Open Letter to Mary Daly is poignant and profound.[99] Lorde praises Daly, overall for the "First Passage", the beginning of the cosmic journey in Gyn/Ecology for her discourse on the function and nature of the Goddess, but notes that Daly omits any reference to non-european Afrekete, Yemanje or Oyo.[100] Lorde suggests that perhaps Daly had made a "conscious decision to narrow her scope and to deal only with the ecology of western European women".[101] Clearly if that had been the case in Gyn/Ecology, it is something Daly addresses in Pure Lust. There she explicitly acknowledges the differences amongst and between women, especially in terms of race, exploring too the concept of racial oppression and sex.[102]

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96 See for example Morris' discussion of the interjector at Daly's 1981 lecture in Sydney, who claimed that Daly was not speaking to her. I think there are enormous problems associated with this question but in itself it is way beyond the scope of this thesis. op. cit., Morris, "A-mazing Grace", pp. 79 - 80.

97 And is 'mutilation' an apt choice of words, given the symbolic associations?

98 See Vicki Kirby, "On the Cutting Edge: Feminism and Clitoridectomy" in Australian Feminist Studies 5 (1987), pp. 35 - 55.

99 op.cit., Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly", p.66.

100 ibid., p. 67.

101 ibid.

102 See, for example, her discussion "The Touchable Caste" op. cit., Daly, Pure Lust, pp. 232-243.

But Lorde's substantive problem with Daly is that she represents non-european women in the "Second Passage" as:

> . . . victims and preyers on each other. I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power. Your inclusion of African genital mutilation was an important and necessary piece in any consideration of female ecology, and too little has been written about it. To imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other . . .[103]

Again, this is something which Daly addresses in Pure Lust when, for instance, she says "As derivative beings, women share in some of the privileges and many of the hardships of their male possessors. For example, as white, wealthy, or middle class, many women have advantages over many sisters in other echelons of the patriarchal world, as well as over many oppressed races, classes, nations, and other groups".[104] Race considerations (in terms of valorising), as Braidotti also points out,[105] do appear to be a quite serious omission from Daly's work in Gyn/Ecology (except in the token sense to which Lorde alludes).[106]

The claims Daly makes about what is the case do not imply what Lorde suggests at all and this is a point of logic. Firstly, Daly's story of women's oppression, does not mean or imply that there is nothing historically noteworthy or valuable in the cultures of, for example, Aboriginal-Australian, African-American or Chinese women. That is to say, because Daly argued that certain practices are followed in a culture, and that these practices are bad or immoral, it does not follow that **all** practices within the culture are bad or immoral. Nor does it follow that because Daly fails to mention other affirming practices and traditions that they do not exist or that women never had power. The point of Daly's recounting these traditions is to highlight the implicit acceptance of anti-woman practices by dominant cultures, which happen to be patriarchal cultures. Who actually

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[103] op. cit., Lorde, "Open Letter to Mary Daly", p. 67.

[104] op. cit., Daly, Pure Lust, p. 240.

[105] One wonders if Braidotti has read Daly's later works.

[106] op. cit., Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, p. 207.

carries out the practices - be they women or men - is irrelevant. What counts is that the discourse, the oral traditions and cultural mythos, affirms the practices. That discourse is men's discourse where men constitute the hegemony. Women are tools of patriarchy in other words, and may even be complicit in their own oppression.

Secondly, Daly's account neither assumes nor implies that all women suffer the **same** oppression because they are women. What she does assume is that all women suffer from oppression, because they are women within **hegemonic** patriarchal frameworks and that these oppressions can be different and that they can come from women as well as men.[107] This is the point of her writing about genital mutilation, *suttee* and foot binding: across cultures women are oppressed by often highly symbolic customs and practices. That does not mean that they cannot also be oppressed because they are African-Americans or Aboriginal Australians: it simply means that in these cases, that they are women, their sex, is the primary factor in their oppression because oppression is an intra-cultural practice not extra-cultural. On this reading, Daly's argument is about cultural difference. In other words, oppression is an **intrinsic** part of the norms of particular cultures where 'outside' questions of race or ethnicity, for example, may not apply. Furthermore, such practices can be perpetrated by women as well as men, acting on and within overarching patriarchal imperatives.

Daly critiques practices which she sees as explicitly oppressive to women in the societies about which she speaks. Daly is unqualified in her antagonism towards socio-political cultural practices which she finds appalling. She may well be speaking the horror which other women might feel at such practices. It does not follow, however, that every woman will feel the horror, nor that they will think that it is the business of white Western women of privilege[108] to be telling all women how they ought to conduct their lives. What does follow is that Daly has a moral position, an ethic which she believes is based upon freeing women from oppressive practices which are embodied in men's discourses and

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[107] See Elizabeth V. Spelman, Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought (Beacon Press, Boston, 1988); op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, and Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology (Continuum, New York, 1994), for accounts of the multiplicative effects of gender, class, race, ethnicity.

[108] This is a phrase which Schüssler Fiorenza frequently uses.

cultural norms. Should Daly fail to analyse, criticise the practices, and say, for example, speak of the glass ceiling or women's poor democratic representation in western parliaments, she would exclude the oppressions of non-european, non-western women. Should she speak of the oppressions which poor, black, or Muslim women live, she is a cultural supremacist or exclusive of their rich culture and history. Either way, Daly can be accused of cultural inclusion (colonisation) or cultural exclusion (supremacism, elitism).

Underlying this 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' dichotomy[109] is the question of how one is to speak of women in the first place. It seems to be clearly the case that women are not an homogeneous group. If women are not a homogeneous group, then lack of homogeneity could be interpreted as evidence against there being an 'essential woman'. Heterogeneity is conceived as an argument against essentialism because if women are all different then plainly, it might be argued, women cannot have any one thing in common. To suppose that one can say anything about women as a group or class, is to deny heterogeneity, to assume that there is some one quality or set of qualities which all women possess. This argument has a superficial plausibility about it. That plausibility is enhanced by Scott's claim that women are constituted through their experiences (which need to be explained) rather than women having experiences (and those experiences explaining what it is or what it means to be a women).

Morris has read Daly as proposing that women are all basically the same. Her quotation earlier in the chapter in which she claims that Daly projects the image of evil in other women condemns Daly for daring to judge other women, indeed, for making the judgement that women who have not taken critical distance from patriarchy are not 'real' women at all. Morris argues that this projection of evil is "indispensable to the Gyn/Ecological speaking position".[110] Why should it not be? Daly's point after all, as I have been arguing here, is that men's language/discourse is the theoretical underpinning of what it means to be (a) woman. What reason can there be for women to refrain from criticism of each other as well as of men? Not surely, that women are a homogeneous group, for that would be to beg the question about essentialism. Nor that women are

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[109] Throughout op. cit., Gyn/Ecology, Daly acknowledges this problem of speaking, for whom and who will and will not be included/excluded.

[110] op. cit., Morris, "A-mazing Grace", p. 83.

morally superior (to men) and above factionalism and the making of value judgements? Or that women ought recognise the differences between/amongst themselves and accept the equability of those differences, without making any value judgements? Why should women not make value judgements, declare that some positions, some ways of be-ing, are of more or less value?

This returns us to the ontological and semantic questions raised in chapter 1. What is it to be a woman and what is the meaning of the term 'woman'? At stake are problems of signification and reference. On Daly's analysis, there do seem to be some meaningful grounds on which one can use the terms 'woman' and 'women'. These terms do seem to refer. The problem then is to what do they refer in Daly's discourse? What do they signify? And how does one define the terms if that is what one seeks to do?

I have already argued that Daly is not seeking to define 'woman', but she obviously intends these terms to be understood in a certain way. The ontological commitment she makes in reconstructing discourse, re-orients the signification of 'woman'. This means that women should reject phallic be-ing for Elemental women's be-ing, - Gynergy - adopting as they do, a new women-centred discourse. But this is surely to beg the question for what is Gynergy? According to the Wickedary, Gynergy is "the female energy which both comprehends and creates who we are; that impulse in ourselves which has never been suppressed by the patriarchy, nor by any male; woman identified being".[111] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza implies that feminists like Daly reinscribe patriarchal discourse by mere use of certain terms.[112] Daly neither spells out what she means by 'female' and 'woman' (except to state that she is using the terms in a metapatriarchal way); nor does she sort out what relation those terms might have to women's bodies, the female body. Yet implicit in her work is the idea of female embodiment. Of course Schüssler Fiorenza's comments have behind them her own theoretical agenda: that the body is already theorised, inscribed by cultural, socio-political discursive practices, so that one cannot really speak of the body *per se.*

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[111] op. cit., Daly the Wickedary, p. 77.

[112] See op. cit., But She Said, pp. 104 - 109.

Hence, that these terms can be read as 'woman' within a purportedly 'new' (metapatriarchal) discourse where they no longer signify what they once did, is problematic. A purported change in signification which bears a change in reference - only those entities that embody and are embodied by women's discourse, are Elemental or postpatriarchal women - also becomes problematic. Painted Birds, fembots are the embodiment of, and are embodied by, men's discourse, certainly, because the bearers of such derogatory labelling never distance themselves from patriarchal discursive practices. But this reading suggests a questionable language dualism with a 'pure female body' as its substructure. Either one opts for female embodiment theoretically overladen by patriarchal discourse (fembots, Painted Birds); or one opts for female embodiment theoretically overladen by metapatriarchal (metaphorical) discourse (crones, witches, chums and so on).

On either reading, one might argue that discourse is the target of Daly's anti-essentialist stance. Women, on such a rendering, have nominal essence: essence dependent on discursive practice, in spite of Daly's denial of nominalism. That is to say, if women are constructed through discourse albeit through their own semiotics and meaning systems, and there is something unique, particular, individual about women as a class, then nominally, women are women because they are produced through discourse which is manifested in unique, particular, individual ways that labels them women. This places a heavy emphasis on the rôle of language and the construction of gender over 'brute' biology. In turn such a re-orientation changes the syntax of representation. The meanings ascribed to 'brute' biology in patriarchal societies are overturned and transcended by metapatriarchal discourse in which women can become. Regardless, women are embodied in an uninterrogated way in terms of their sexed embodiment.

This reading, it might then be argued, depends upon a notion of real essence which operates at the level of body: female embodiment remains constant, that around which discursive practices take place. As I have indicated, this position is problematic.

If it is the case that men's discourse has been and continues to be what constitutes patriarchal women (fembots, Painted Birds), then men's discourse has been and remains the theoretical foundation for the elaboration of the idea of woman. For Daly, that is unacceptable. The development of woman's be-ing, **Elemental** woman's be-ing,

is dependent ultimately on the rejection of masculine discourse, men's discourse. The production of the Wickedary is not an odd, isolated semantic act. It carries with it the promise of something new for women and an ethic of celebration of the goodness of women. That does not mean that all men are bad and all women are good. What it does mean is that the terms 'woman' are in a process of re-conceptualisation that combines all that is good in (male defined) women and points to the newness of (female constituted) women.

Daly's intuition about the rôle of discourse is very sound. Her belief is that the Divine, the Goddess, is mirrored through language practices and therefore the Divine is the mirror of women. The claim that discourse must be sex/gender specific, and Daly's creating the context for metapatriarchal discourse, is a superb strategy. But if, as I have suggested, this rests on some unarticulated assumptions about female embodiment, the project needs to be interrogated because it is undeniably dualistic. On the other hand, that female embodiment is implicit in Daly's ontology 'ties' feminine being to the Divine, the goddess through participation. One could not elaborate the Goddess without elaborating what it means to be a woman. The Divine mirrors women in terms of their gendered construction and their sexed embodiment. The question remains: Can one account for female embodiment in non-essentialist ways? Or must we accept Schüssler Fiorenza's assertion about reinscription and revalorisation?

For Schüssler Fiorenza, reinscription and an associated concept, revalorisation, work on assumptions about the supposedly natural. Her project is to de-naturalise feminist terminologies and discourses. Far from accepting that embodiment is in some way theoretically pure - 'brute' biology - as Daly seems to imply, Schüssler Fiorenza takes to task feminists who do not interrogate what she regards as culturally laden assumptions about body facts and characteristics. In my next chapter, I shall be exploring Schüssler Fiorenza's work in that context, counter positioning her with/against Daly.

In this chapter, I have shown that Mary Daly's work is primarily directed towards the re-creation of women through the construction and re-construction of discourse. In that, Goddess is the mirror of women. I have argued that far from her project's being a mere changing of isolated signs as Morris has argued, she is concerned to produce a subversive woman's discourse. Implicit in that project is the development of an ethic

which valorises women without re-inscribing real essentialist accounts (such as the Eternal Woman) of woman. I have argued along with Morris that Daly uses language strategically to disrupt and destabilise the dominant discourse. I have also argued, using Schüssler Fiorenza's terminology, that this strategy is ontological-linguistic, meaning that Daly maintains a strong relationship exists between be-ing and language, indeed that the two are so intertwined that language becomes ontology for Daly. By this I mean that discourse both embodies and constitutes the very be-ing of Elemental women so that they can participate in Be-ing. Hence I maintain that the sex-neutrality of the dominant discourse is called into question by Daly's visioning of a women's discourse which re-works the terminology of men's discourse while projecting a future possibility.

I have claimed that interpreters such as Morris and Braidotti fail to acknowledge Daly's sub-text: that the use of metaphor is the means by which she proceeds. Thus one should not read Daly's texts literally. A literal reading renders her work as inconsequential and essentialising. However, I have also claimed that Daly is attempting to develop a feminist ethic through her discursive work, one situated in the re-making of women from men's discourse - patriarchy. In that sense, Daly cannot but use her cultural heritage, but her use is always tongue in cheek and subverting. And I have maintained that commentators like Laude draw invalid implications from Daly's works.

I have also argued that Daly uses a dualistic strategy in which language is constitutive of the production of woman, a nominal essentialism, which depends upon an unarticulated but implicit real essentialist account of female embodiment. In this way, Daly exemplifies Grosz's rendering of constructionism which is manifested in de Lauretis' rejection of real essence as the locus of feminist theorising about essence. On an account like the one I have offered for Daly, this conjunction is plausible and real essence and nominal essence 'sit' together, even if their relationship is unexplained. But can one talk about the body in the essentialist way which seems to be implicit in Daly's account? Since this use of 'real' echoes Locke's notion of real essence as independently 'real', what would it mean to think of the body thus? And what repercussion would this have for an account of women's experience? What would maintaining that there is an independently 'real' body say about the Divine in women's experience? These are matters which I shall be addressing in my next chapters.

CHAPTER 3

BUT SHE SAID, BUT SHE DID *NOT* SAY: ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, AND THE EKKLESIA AS THE MIRROR OF G*D

Mary Daly's rejection of the eternal feminine, hence her rejection of woman's essence, resonates in the work of the Christian feminist theologian, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. The socio-political orientation of Schüssler Fiorenza's work is very different from Daly's emphasis on personal emancipation and self-discovery as a condition of socio-political change. Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza represent in different ways, the twin projects of feminist theologies: refiguring the Divine and its inalienably political commitment. However, both theorists share the belief that language is instrumental in the oppression of women. They also hold the view that women are not subjects who **have** experiences. Their views on women's experience(s) follow more closely that of Scott's: women are constituted as women through their experiences. Subjectivity is a result of experience, not that which gives rise to experience.

Further, Nancy Frankenberry's claim that there is a conspicuous reliance on Feuerbachian projection theory in feminist theologies is in evidence in the work of Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza. Both Daly, as I argued in the last chapter, and Schüssler Fiorenza, as I will argue in this chapter, share this theoretical standpoint. Whereas Daly's projected Divine is the Goddess, the Verb of all Verbs which mirrors women's emancipatory discourse, Schüssler Fiorenza's Divine, G*d, I will argue, is the mirror of the ekklesia, although she declares that "G*d radically transcends human experience".[1] In an interesting twist, I will contend that as the Divine is the mirror of the ekklesia, so the ekklesia is the mirror of the Divine, the 'reverse projection theory' of Plato's to which I referred in my introductory chapter.

I also argued that Daly entirely rejected essentialism and that what she offered in its place has been interpreted as the re-appropriation of essentialist theory. Schüssler

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[1] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology (Continuum, New York, 1994), p. 179.

Fiorenza is equally ardent in her rejection of women's essence. But what she offers in its place is a social constructionism which denies that language reflects any 'facts of the matter'. As I read Schüssler Fiorenza, she believes that discourse constructs 'reality'. I will argue, however, that Schüssler Fiorenza does not interpret 'social constructionism'. Rather, she takes its meaning to be transparent. As I argue later, her assuming the transparency of 'social constructionism' raises some complicated theoretical issues, which lead to neglecting the idea of embodiment and its importance for feminist theology.

In terms of the essentialist debate Schüssler Fiorenza and Daly apparently occupy opposing corners, although their opposition to essentialism is unfaltering. Daly has left the Catholic Church (although she has retained much of its theological embroidery) while Schüssler Fiorenza has chosen to remain faithful to its spirit, working for reform from 'within'. Schüssler Fiorenza is anti-essentialist and re-works Christian theology inside a feminist, critical hermeneutical liberationist framework.[2] Daly maintains that she has deserted Christianity but retains what she believes to be an anti-essentialist perspective. However, their metaphysical assumptions with respect to 'reality' are closely connected. The connection lies in their emphases on discourse as that which primarily constitutes 'reality'. Yet Daly's tacit assumption, and Schüssler Fiorenza's explicit acknowledgement, is that there is an essential 'reality' independent of discourse. In Daly's case, as I have argued, that 'reality' is female embodiment. In Schüssler Fiorenza's, as I will argue, it is both 'that about which one can have more or less adequate accounts' and G*d.

Contrary to Daly's, Schüssler Fiorenza's position on speaking of women as women is not decried by her commentators because she does not believe that it is possible to talk of women as women, as a 'sex/gender only' category. She follows Spelman carefully in arguing that race and class are important primary oppressors along with gender, and that all are cultural factors which act simultaneously to oppress women. As I read both Scott and Schüssler Fiorenza, Schüssler Fiorenza would endorse Scott's analysis of the idea of women's experience. Women are not pre-formed subjects who have experiences; rather women are constructed through their experiences. Hence Schüssler Fiorenza's

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[2] See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (SCM Press, London, 1983).

discussions of woman, language, ontology, and sexed embodiment are couched in terms of discursive constructionism in which the notion of the socio-political is paramount.

My purpose in this chapter is to examine Schüssler Fiorenza's use of social constructionism and to reflect on her rejection of essentialism and the consequences this has for the development of the idea of women's experience(s) and the Divine. I begin with two quotes, one from Schüssler Fiorenza and one from de Beauvoir. Each quote fairly represents their authors' refusals of essentialism and their acceptance of forms of social constructionism. They should be read comparatively, noting their similar philosophical stances.

> What it means to be a Christian woman is not defined by essential female nature or timeless biblical revelation, but grows out of the concrete social structures and cultural-religious mechanisms of women's oppression as well as our struggles for liberation, selfhood and transcendence. Feminist identity is not based on the perception of women defined by female biology or feminine gender and societal roles, but on the common historical experience of women as an oppressed people, collaborating with our oppression and at the same time struggling with liberation in patriarchal biblical history and community.[3]

> When I use the words *woman* or *feminine* I evidently refer to no archetype, no changeless essence whatever; the reader must understand the phrase "in the present state of education and custom" after most of my statements. It is not our concern here to proclaim eternal verities, but rather to describe the common basis that underlies every individual feminine existence.[4]

I introduced the debate about woman's essence in order to highlight the problematic nature of women's experience for feminist theologies. In chapter 1 I noted that tables like Pythagoras' use binary oppositional terms which construct and sanction privilege so that women are defined in terms of the lesser side of a hierarchy which emerges. In chapter 2, I discussed the work of Mary Daly who has been a vocal opponent of essentialism and whose present work, I noted, is seen by many to return to a (real) essentialist position. I argued that Daly's work might be essentialist in two ways:

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[3] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation (Beacon Press, Boston, 1984), p. 86.

[4] Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (trans. H. M. Parshley) (Picador Books, London, 1949), p. xxx.

nominally, when one considers her creative use of language, and realist, when one considers her implicit acceptance of an apparently natural body existing independently of language. On this account the idea of a nominal essence of women brings with it the promise of becoming, historicity, difference and open-endedness. The status of female embodiment in terms of essence is unstated. Women are embodied, but Daly declines to give the idea of embodiment explicit meaning.

Schüssler Fiorenza takes her critique of essentialism further than Daly's, rejecting even nominal essentialist positions since in her view they revalorise and reinscribe the feminine and traditional concepts of women. Unlike Daly, who 'mixes' her social constructionism with an implicit acceptance of female embodiment which is apparently independent of language, Schüssler Fiorenza rejects essentialist talk, implicit or explicit, which implies the existence of a natural, independently 'real' body.

In terms of her interpretation of the 'natural', Schüssler Fiorenza's position is ambiguous and difficult to determine. She can be read either as claiming that there is only language - and in this respect one might think of her as a linguistic idealist; or she can be read as arguing that everything is already in language, that there are no brute facts. On the first interpretation, language is responsible for producing all of our concepts and constructs 'reality' totally. On the second, the distinction between what we interpret and what there is, is not acknowledged: the world and language interact in such a way as to be inseparable. I proceed on the basis that Schüssler Fiorenza is not a linguistic idealist because of her insistence on the independent 'reality' of G*d, and because of her views on access to truth about 'reality',[5] which I discuss later in this chapter.

It should be noted that the difficulty with claiming either of the two views for Schüssler Fiorenza, is exacerbated by her appeal for a "feminist version of objectivity"

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[5] For an excellent discussion of theological realism and reference, see ch. VII, "Metaphor, Reference and Realism" and ch. VIII, "Metaphor and Theological Realism" in Janet Martin Soskice, Metaphor and Religious Language (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992). For a discussion of the real in Plato, see "The Sophist" in Francis Macdonald Cornford (trans. & commentary), Plato's Theory of Knowledge (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, New York, 1935), 237b - 251a.

and a "more adequate account of a 'real' world",[6] a "more adequate account of reality".[7] However, underlying Schüssler Fiorenza's work is the assumption that language does not refer. As I just suggested, she assumes a view of language implicit in which are the ideas of interpretation, meaning and discursive construction. As I read her, she could be arguing that there is no distinction between that which one talks about, and that about which one **says** one is talking.[8] On this view there is no independent or objective item or thing about which one is talking, no essential referent in principle separable from language. When, for instance, Schüssler Fiorenza speaks about secondary sexual characteristics, an example I shall discuss more fully later, she claims that there are no facts of the matter. Schüssler Fiorenza's seems not to be a theory just about meaning ladenness and signification, nor just about categories and classifications, but about what we, for example, can say about sex/gender in a **referential** context (that having a beard is a male secondary sex characteristic, for instance). Thus her talk of a feminist version of objectivity is puzzling.

I read Schüssler Fiorenza as making the inference from "one cannot give a theory independent description of things" to "there are no theory independent things".[9] One version of the claim that there is no distinction between things and their descriptions, the belief that 'everything is in language', dominates current French and some American feminist theory.[10] Schüssler Fiorenza, as we shall see, clearly wants to argue that there is no brute nature, no brute biology, and that nature and biology are always already in

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6 Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation (Beacon Press, Boston, 1992), p. 90.

7 ibid., p. 91.

8 Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1990), p. 268 ff.

9 ibid., p. 279.

10 See Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism (Allen & Unwin, St. Leonard's, 1994); Catherine A. MacKinnon, Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1987); Luce Irigaray, Speculum Of The Other Woman (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1992), and This Sex Which Is Not One (trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke) (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1985); and Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (Routledge, London & New York, 1990).

language. She accepts that discursive construction is responsible for producing our ideas and concepts which are in turn culturally and socially conditioned:

> . . . once women have recognised ourselves as historical subjects and theological agents we can develop a hermeneutics of suspicion which recognises the androcentric ideological construction of reality in language, texts and other religious-cultural representations.[11]

On the other hand, Schüssler Fiorenza explicitly embraces the idea that meaning and existence are separable. As we shall see, she maintains a distinction between 'reality' and language, between what exists and what meaning is ascribed to that existence through different socio-cultural discursive practices.

> Historical representation gives *meaning* not *existence* to past events. . . By underlining the fact that all cultural forms of representation are ideologically grounded and that access to reality is always mediated through language, one problematises and de-naturalises references to the real. Such a demystification does not, feminist theory insists, excuse us from giving a more adequate account of reality, an account that does not deny or repress the historical activity of the subordinated "others."[12]

The Divine and history are two examples of this. In this way, I will argue, Schüssler Fiorenza is essentialist. Recall that Fuss argued that the pull of essentialism is difficult to escape because of continued semantic use. Also recall Fuss' claim that the division between (real) essentialism and social constructionism has (real) essentialist implications with which we should not persist.

As I read her then, there are several competing perspectives in Schüssler Fiorenza's work in relation to the idea of reality and the Divine. Firstly, there is the notion that socio-cultural discursive practice constructs some concepts, like that of the 'natural' and the 'given', which we (mistakenly) take to reflect 'reality'. Since there is no 'reality' independent of language which the natural and the given reflect, her argument is that we should think of such concepts and relations as discursively produced. Secondly, she maintains that the Divine reality cannot be comprehended by human language,[13] that

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[11] op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 90.

[12] ibid., p. 91.

[13] op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 161.

there is something 'real' to be interpreted and understood, and that something transcends human experiences. Thirdly, the goal of feminist analysis, for example in feminist biblical interpretation, is to "empower women through critical analysis and constructive narrative" to create a "*different* reality". [her italics][14] The ambiguity of Schüssler Fiorenza's position echoes the essentialist/social constructionist dilemma posed by de Lauretis. (Feminists do not really mean 'real essence', but 'nominal essence', when they talk about essentialism.) I shall return to this shortly after I have discussed Schüssler Fiorenza's reading of the 'natural' in relation to the idea of women.

Schüssler Fiorenza's argument about discursive practice and social constructionism is not confined to the idea of women. For her, all that we count as 'natural' is produced through discursive practice. Notwithstanding the fact that Schüssler Fiorenza attributes an 'independent of language' status to G*d, the idea of the Divine does not, I will argue, resist discursive positioning. This is realised in the idea that the Divine is the mirror of the ekklesia.

The concept of the ekklesia, women-church, evokes the ideas of justice, wisdom and freedom from oppression. The socio-political systemic oppression which constitutes individuals as classifiable within sex/gender, class and racial categories, is not patriarchy, maintains Schüssler Fiorenza. She argues that the idea of patriarchy speaks only to sex/gender considerations. Since they alone are not responsible for producing oppression, she refigures 'patriarchy' as 'kyriarchy'. Along with that, she declares that women are not alone in being oppressed, and re-characterises those who are oppressed as 'wo/men'.

'Ekklesia', together with 'kyriarchy', 'G*d' and 'wo/men' are neologisms which Schüssler Fiorenza introduces in her attempts to destabilise androcentric biases in theological discourse. Preparatory to my discussion, in the next few pages I will elaborate these ideas in the context of exploring the relation between the Divine and women's experience.

Kyriarchy and Wo/men

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[14] op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 92.

Schüssler Fiorenza's early works are devoted to investigating the origins of androcentric biblical interpretation. She argues that androcentric interpretation either fails to acknowledge women's experiences and/or has succeeded in silencing women. In Bread Not Stone and In Memory of Her she attempts to reconstruct women's experiences as disciples of Jesus and she argues that women were central to his life and mission.[15] She also argues, as she continues to do in her later works, that::

> . . . feminist biblical interpretation must place at the center of its attention every woman's struggles to transform patriarchal structures, both in biblical times and in our own, rather than focusing only on the androcentric biblical text and its authority. Since, throughout the centuries, patriarchal theology and church have silenced women and excluded us from religious institutions of authority, feminist theology must seek to empower women to become theological subjects, to participate in the critical construction of biblical-theological meanings, and to claim their authority to do so. In reclaiming women's authority to shape and determine biblical religions, feminist theology attempts to reconceptualize the act of biblical interpretation as a moment in the global praxis for liberation.[16]

The emphasis in her writing is two-fold: on uncovering the biblical traditions which valorise women and their experiences of oppression and liberation, and on translating into the present, theological truths which emerge from liberationist biblical texts. Hence, Schüssler Fiorenza reads and interprets the Christian Testament[17] and the Apocrypha as texts which suggest that women, far from being powerless and lacking in authority, were instead influential and instrumental in the early spreading of the gospel news. Although it is not evident in traditional interpretations that women were empowered in the ways she alleges, Schüssler Fiorenza argues that their rôles were devalued by the patriarchalisation of the Church and the ascendancy of power politics. An embryonic democratic politics based on social justice and the desire for freedom from oppression was eliminated through this patriarchalisation. She proposes a radical feminist hermeneutics in which the

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15 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, *passim.*

16 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 8.

17 Schüssler Fiorenza alleges that the terms 'New' and 'Old' Testament are supersessionist and replaces them with 'Christian' and 'Common' Testaments respectively. This is in keeping with her refusal to use the term 'Judeo-Christian' because of its elitist overtones. See op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 193.

androcentric nature of biblical texts are highlighted and revealed and where she attempts a textual recovery of women.[18]

Bread Not Stone and later In Memory of Her are works which place the foundations for a specifically feminist approach to biblical hermeneutics and a feminist theology of liberation. But She Said and Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet, Schüssler Fiorenza's most recent books, elaborate a sophisticated 'logic of democracy', in which she argues for communities composed of equal disciples who share differences, yet are united in their desire for liberation, justice and equality.

She argues, as I have already noted, against a sex/gender focused position, claiming that sex/gender is but one reason for oppression amongst other socio-political oppressions like race, class and ethnicity. I indicated that Schüssler Fiorenza believes the sex/gender system arises out of certain 'naturalising' social power relations, arrangements, interpretations and structures which appear to be common sense. Part of her enterprise is to de-naturalise the sex/gender system, claiming that it, and the assumption that it is somehow 'natural', is a product of **kyriarchal** relations and discursive practices arising from those relations. She maintains that patriarchy, defined as male/female gender dualism in which all men oppress all women, misrepresents what patriarchy really is, a systematic, oppressive and hierarchical organising structure which is multiplicative.[19] For Schüssler Fiorenza, to conceive of patriarchy solely in terms of sex/gender binary opposition, as a system in which all men dominate all women, is over simplistic.[20]

The term 'kyriarchy', and its cognates 'kyriarchal' and 'kyriocentric', which she uses instead of 'patriarchy', speak to the interlocking dominating power structures which

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[18] op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, *passim.*

[19] ibid., ch 4. "Justa", especially p. 114, and *passim.*

[20] ibid., *passim.* See especially, p. 114: "The mainstream feminist articulation of women's oppression primarily in terms of gender domination has been problematised for years by socialist-Marxist feminists as well as by Third World feminists. They have pointed out, on the one hand, that women are oppressed not only by sexism, but also by racism classism and colonialism. On the other hand, they have rejected the mainstream feminist definition of patriarchy which holds that men are the oppressors and women the victims, and that culture history and religion are man-made. Instead, women of colour have argued consistently that women of subordinated classes are often more oppressed by elite white women than by men of their own class, race, culture, or religion."

oppress all women and some men. Taking a cue from Joan Cocks, she maintains that what she calls the kyriocentric regime has two aspects "namely patriarchal and phallic power . . . Patriarchal power as *kyriarchal* power operates on an institutional-structural level while phallic power functions on a linguistic ideological level. However, the two modes of kyriarchal power are not equivalent". [her italics][21] It is the former with which Schüssler Fiorenza is overwhelmingly concerned.

'Kyriocentric' (and its cognates), by shifting the emphasis from men to power relations, excuses all men from the charge of universally dominating and oppressing all women. According to Schüssler Fiorenza it is not the case that all men dominate all women. A claim like this about sex/gender misrepresents the oppressive power structures of European dominated societies which have been influenced by Greek and Roman concepts of democracy. Sex/gender is but one of the many oppressive 'systems'[22] which operate to preserve the interests of the privileged minority who exploit the majority. Privilege is constructed through a combination of the 'right' class, sex/gender and race.

> By the term kyriocentric I mean to indicate that not all men dominate and exploit all women but that elite Western educated propertied Euro-American men have articulated and benefited from women's and other "non-persons'" exploitation.[23]

In arguing that patriarchy is actually an oppressive and hierarchical theoretical and socio-political structure, better called 'kyriarchy', Schüssler Fiorenza maintains that sex/gender alone is not responsible for, nor the basis of, oppressive systems.[24] Her

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[21] ibid., p. 123.

[22] Schüssler Fiorenza consistently refers to the 'sex/gender system'. See op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said and Jesus: Miriam's Child, *passim.*

[23] op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, footnote 37, p. 241.

[24] Her argument follows closely the arguments of Elizabeth V. Spelman, Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought (Beacon Press, Boston, 1988), about which I spoke in chapter 1. Indeed Schüssler Fiorenza acknowledges Spelman's claim about the relationship between gender and other oppressive factors such as race and class. In arguing that sex/gender is not **the** central or primary oppressive category, Schüssler Fiorenza is taking a stand against feminists who argue all oppression is in some way based upon sex/gender oppression (for example Rosemary Radford Ruether, in Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology (SCM Press, London, 1983), and standing for feminists who claim that other factors, like race, contribute equally to oppression. And Luce Irigaray argues that "Women aren't just poor amongst the poor. As half the human race, it is their exploitation that makes it possible to exploit others". See Luce Irigaray,

argument revolves around the idea that patriarchy, thought of in terms of sex/gender binary opposition, is Euro-centric and does not take into account the many forms of oppression which arise out of class, race and ethnic relations and which seem to be ignored by many Euro-American feminist theorists. This is the nature of the complaint made by Lorde against Daly, as I noted in chapter 2. It is also in the spirit of Spelman's analysis: class, race and ethnicity concurrently constitute the concept 'woman'.

Schüssler Fiorenza also argues that any use of sex/gender as a primary analytic category reinscribes hegemonic patriarchal discourses and practices. Schüssler Fiorenza maintains that kyriarchy is organised through a powerful structure which can be represented by a pyramidal schematising of the democracy of ancient Greece and Rome. In this pyramid, the kyriarchal pyramid, those who are the least oppressed, are at the top and those who are the most oppressed are at the bottom of the pyramid.[25]

Schüssler Fiorenza acknowledges the multiplicative, the compounding effects, that simultaneous oppressions have.[26] To repeat, she does not consider that there is anything originary about the kind of oppression that sexism is. If we accept the primacy of sex/gender oppression, Schüssler Fiorenza thinks, what follows from that omits other primary oppressive categories: race, for example, as a primary oppressive force is overlooked and as black feminists have argued, that is a special concern for them. Their oppression as blacks is obliterated or silenced, as the condition for white women, often middle class, is taken to be representative of all women.[27] Since, on Schüssler Fiorenza's view, sex/gender oppression is always moderated and compounded by class, race, ethnic, cultural and religious considerations, sex/gender alone cannot have the theoretical and practical implications which are attributed to it by Euro-American and white feminists.

"Equal To Whom?", in Naomi Schor & Elizabeth Weed (eds.), The Essential Difference, Books from Differences Series (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994), p.68

[25] See op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, pp. 114 - 120.

[26] The term 'multiple jeopardy' occurs in the work of Deborah H. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology", in Micheline R. Malson, Jean F. O'Barr, Sarah Westphal-Wihl & Mary Wyer (eds.) in Feminist Theory in Practice and Process (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989).'The modifier "multiple" refers not only to several simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well', p. 80.

[27] op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 114 and *passim*; See op. cit., King "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness", p. 78.

In other words, as a central organising concept, as **the** primary oppression sex/gender fails to acknowledge its own contextuality. This, as I read Schüssler Fiorenza, is a mistake that is made and perpetuated by theorists who understand patriarchy as a system of binary and totalising oppositions. The need to de-naturalise sex/gender is a direct response to both the articulation of patriarchy in terms of binary oppositions and the centrality given to sex/gender in that conceptualisation. Note again Schüssler Fiorenza's resonance with Spelman.

Why Schüssler Fiorenza should want to displace the emphasis on sex/gender as the central organising concept for feminists is, then, very clear. In the first place she believes that the emphasis on sex/gender is a Euro-American, or at least Euro-centric, phenomenon which is articulated primarily by privileged Euro-American or Euro-centric women with a particular understanding and interpretation of patriarchy.[28]

Secondly, and this is related to the first, the question 'For whom are Euro-centric (white middle class) women speaking?' underlies her critique. To this end, she uses the writings of coloured women to point out that they do not think the white privileged are speaking for them. Quite to the contrary, argues Schüssler Fiorenza. Many women of colour feel that they are excluded by the privileged 'white talk'[29] of such feminists.[30]

A third reason for Schüssler Fiorenza's wanting to displace the emphasis on sex/gender is her wish to see sex/gender differences and relations de-naturalised. As I have observed, she appeals to Spelman's work on Plato and Aristotle which argues that not only sex/gender relations but class and race relations were also purported by the Greeks to be 'natural'.[31] She believes that sex/gender categories and relations arise from the structural workings of patriarchy (later kyriarchy) which separate men and women who

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28 ibid., pp. 106 - 107.

29 My term, not Schüssler Fiorenza's, but it is appropriate here.

30 See, for example, bell hooks' comments in feminist theory from margin to center (South End Press, Boston,1987), about Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (Dell Books, New York, 1974). See also Ann Pattel-Gray, "Not yet Tiddas: An Aboriginal Womanist Critique of Australian Church Feminism" in Maryanne Confoy, Dorothy A. Lee and Joan Nowotny, Freedom and Entrapment (Dove Publications, Melbourne, 1995).

31 See op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, "Justa" *passim*.

are understood to be distinguishable through fundamental essential and natural differences.

As I have been arguing, Schüssler Fiorenza does not hold that differences are 'essential' or 'natural'. Class, race, ethnicity and sex/gender emerge through socio-political arrangements and in this sense are socially constructed. Note that Schüssler Fiorenza does not simply argue that differences are interpreted differently across different cultures. Rather, hers is the stronger thesis that differences themselves are (already) socially constructed, not merely their interpretation. I shall return to this important point later.

For Schüssler Fiorenza, to reject essential (and 'natural') differences is precisely to de-naturalise sex/gender. Schüssler Fiorenza believes that if one ascribes essential properties to something, then one assigns natural properties to that something. She thinks of those 'natural' properties as 'common sense' or 'given'.[32] To ascribe essential properties to women, is to say that women have certain 'natural' or descriptive properties from which follow ascriptive valuations. The descriptive, on this view, gives rise to the normative. For example, if one were to ascribe to women the essential property of having two x chromosomes, it would also be to ascribe the supposedly natural properties of caring and nurturing to women. It is therefore somehow 'common' sense to think of women in terms of their abilities to bear, care for and nurture children. Schüssler Fiorenza's move then is not to deny that the normative follows from the descriptive, but to claim that what we have though of as 'natural', should be unmasked as androcentric interpretation taken to be universally true for all.

I remarked in chapter 1 that Elizabeth Grosz notes that essentialising terms are "used in patriarchal discourses to justify women's social subordination and their secondary position relative to men in patriarchal society".[33] There I asked the question, Do they have to be? If we think of the way in which terms are used to justify certain customs in patriarchal discourse as a claim about normative practices, then Schüssler Fiorenza's argument about the 'natural' is exemplary of Grosz's interpretation. In other words, Schüssler Fiorenza implicitly accepts that the normative, the prescriptive, follows

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[32] ibid., p. 104.

[33] See chapter 1, p. 26.

from the descriptive, thought of in terms of essence. On her view, I am claiming, once one does admit essences into one's ontology, normative consequences unavoidably follow. That is to say, she appears to believe that if one admits that secondary sex characteristics for example are taken to be 'real' independent of language, then one must also accept that prescriptive or normative entailments follow. I will return to this problem in my final chapter. Now I simply signpost this as a problem which needs to be addressed.

To denaturalise, as I have been reading Schüssler Fiorenza, is to deny that there is anything 'essential' or 'given' or 'natural' and 'common sense' about the categories of sex/gender, class, race and so on. The process of de-naturalising sex/gender is therefore dependent upon rejecting the idea that women and men have certain essential and 'natural' properties which are 'common sense'. This is also the case for race, class and ethnicity, none of which, Schüssler Fiorenza asserts, is 'natural'. Schüssler Fiorenza appears to think that 'essential', 'natural', 'given' and 'common-sense' are co-extensive. But it is unclear in what sense one is supposed to understand the co-extensiveness of 'natural' and 'common sense'. 'It's natural for women to two x chromosomes' and 'It's common sense for pregnant women to give birth in hospital in case they have *post partum* haemorrhages' are not statements which one would regard as equivalent. One could not argue that 'It's natural for women to have two x chromosomes' is equivalent to 'It's common sense for women to have two x chromosomes', just as one could not argue that 'It's common sense for pregnant women to give birth in hospital in case of *post-partum* haemorrhage' is equivalent to 'It's natural for pregnant women to give birth in hospital in case of *post-partum* haemorrhage'. Here, the natural and the common sense are obviously different categories.

However, it is clear that Schüssler Fiorenza's strategy is to subvert the idea of natural categories in an attempt to dislodge the dominance of androcentric "logic of identity":

> . . . the philosophical logic of identity, which in antiquity articulated the asymmetric binary dualisms of human/animal, male/female, and free/slave as "natural" differences in order to legitimate patriarchal relations of dominance and subordination, is also inscribed in the discourses of modern Eurocentric political philosophy and theology. . . . In short,

knowledge is not just gendered, but also racial, class-centred and Eurocentric.[34]

It is in the context of her project to naturalise what we have understood as 'natural' or 'common sense' categories that Schüssler Fiorenza's neologism 'wo/men' comes into play. Schüssler Fiorenza alleges that "'woman"/'women" is often read as referring to white women only'.[35] As I noted in chapter 1, Elizabeth Spelman argues that 'woman'/'women' was an exclusive category in Aristotelian philosophy.[36] 'Woman' as well as being opposed to 'man', was also opposed to 'female slave': one was not and could not be both a female slave and a woman. 'Woman' was therefore not an anthropological or biological term, signifying a natural class, but was a social, class term.

Schüssler Fiorenza's comments about conceiving of 'woman' as white (middle class), suggest that she believes we have not moved beyond this Aristotelian position. Thought of in sex/gender terms, 'woman' retains the classist, racist overtones which Spelman attributes to it; therefore as a sex/gender term, it is exclusive rather than inclusive. As it excluded female slaves in the Greek State, so it now excludes many women who are not white or middle class. Schüssler Fiorenza does not want to eliminate use of the term 'woman' completely. Instead, she wants to retain the use of the terms 'woman' and 'women' as a political category.[37]

According to Schüssler Fiorenza, one of the main problems with the terms 'woman' and 'women', apart from the critique of sex/gender as that which primarily constitutes patriarchy, is that they evoke the (false) notions of a universal essence possessed by all women, regardless of class, religion, culture. On this reading women constitute a 'natural' category. There is little room for difference to operate in this universalising, ahistorical conceptualisation.

Schüssler Fiorenza introduces the neologism 'wo/men' to circumvent its sex/gender associations. Her expression, and its use, is meant to indicate that women

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34 ibid., pp. 121-122.

35 For a discussion of this, see op. cit., Jesus: Miriam's Child, endnote 1, p. 191.

36 op. cit., Spelman, Inessential Woman.

37 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 191.

form an unstable, polymorphous category. The term is meant to be inclusive of all women **as well as** any men who are oppressed by class, gender/sex, culture *et alia* and she does not want it to be understood as an exclusive, universalised gender term.[38] By coining the expression 'wo/men' Schüssler Fiorenza intends to transcend the binary opposition of women against men, to displace any naturalistic connotations the word 'woman' might have. Her term 'wo/men' as she also indicates in Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet, "seeks to indicate that women are not a unitary social group but rather are fragmented and fractured by structures of race, class, religion, heterosexuality, colonialism, age and health".[39]

In shifting the emphasis from, and de-naturalising, sex/gender as Schüssler Fiorenza sets out to do, she also sets out to destabilise the theoretical prominence of the subject in favour of an emphasis on the socio-political context of oppression.[40] Along with the concepts of wo/men and kyriarchy, Schüssler Fiorenza uses the complex term 'ekklesia gynaikon', women-church, by which she means the democratic church community, the rhetorical, symbolic space, the discursive frame of reference for women.[41] Her rudimentary attempts to explain this concept revolved around the "political-oppositional rather than exclusionary" notion of "self-identified women and women-identified men in biblical religion"[42] reminiscent of Daly's early work.

Schüssler Fiorenza abandons this explanation of ekklesia in In Memory of Her and re-orients it in But She Said and Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet to explicate it as a "radical democratic praxis" which "provides a symbolic space in which a feminist reading of the Bible is possible".[43] It is here that she acknowledges her preference for

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38 ibid., p. 191.

39 ibid., p. 24.

40 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, "Justa", especially pp. 109ff.

41 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 28. See also op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, *passim.*

42 See op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Bread Not Stone, p. xiv

43 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 11.

what she calls a "logic of democracy" (radical equality[44]) over what she terms a logic of identity, because the emancipatory struggles of wo/men are identified through a socio-political rather than an individual-subject hermeneutics. The socio-political is the site of struggles for freedom from oppression where kyriocentric practices which dominate and oppress must be located and destroyed.

Schüssler Fiorenza's impetus for the logic of democracy originates in radical interpretative analysis of biblical texts. Schüssler Fiorenza acknowledges the androcentricity of biblical texts, but maintains that in the life of Jesus and because of his association with women, women are already valorised in Christian origins and traditions, but that these traditions have been omitted or have silenced woman through the ascendancy of patriarchy.[45] In reconstructing women's biblical and early Christian experiences, and in acknowledging and challenging the socio-political context of structuring all lives through kyriarchal relations, Schüssler Fiorenza believes that wo/men can overcome the androcentric message which has been privileged as 'The Truth' in the development of biblical-theological understandings. Hence the logic of democracy is intertwined with the ekklesia gynaikon, the discipleship of equals where wo/men are full participants, the "full democratic assembly of wo/men".[46]

Ironically, Schüssler Fiorenza's notion evolves from the Greek idea of democracy which she acknowledges was imperfect and exclusive: only men were citizens in Greek democracy and as such were the only ones who could fully participate in deciding their own affairs.[47] She adopts Page du Bois' analysis, which interprets the logic of democracy as a "notion of equal power among members of community". This notion, which "required the radical distribution of wealth, the elimination of social and political hierarchies. For

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44 ibid., pp. 131-132.

45 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 29. Here Schüssler Fiorenza speaks of women's presence and agency in biblical texts, recalling her arguments in op. cit. Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, where this is a dominant theme.

46 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 27.

47 For an in depth discussion of democracy see op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, "Justa" and "Sophia", *passim.*

some ancient thinkers, even slavery itself, was eventually called into question".[48] Schüssler Fiorenza propounds the idea of democracy as that which overcomes domination and oppression and which insists on the "free assembly of citizens who gather to decide their own affairs".[49]

As she understands it, the logic of democracy leaves open and continually calls into question the historical contextualisation of biblical texts and their interpretations, and situates "(t)he hermeneutical insights and theological challenges of the heterogeneous voices emerging from the feminist movements of liberation around the world" which are "central to the process of biblical interpretation in the rhetorical space of the *ekklesia*". [her italics][50]

This understanding of feminist biblical liberationist hermeneutics and the theology it entails, brings a different understanding of God. In Bread Not Stone and In Memory of Her, her use of the term 'God' is not problematic. Taking precedent from Rebecca Chopp,[51] Schüssler Fiorenza re-writes 'God' as 'G-d' in Discipleship of Equals and But She Said. 'Such a writing of G-d is meant to indicate that G-d is "in a religious sense unnameable" and belongs to the "realm of the ineffable" G-d is not G-d's "proper name"'.[52] With the publication of Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet, Schüssler Fiorenza again changes her notation, writing 'G-d' now as 'G*d'[53] in deference to Jewish feminists who had taken exception to what they saw as a conservative and reactionary "theological

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48 ibid., p. 151.

49 ibid., p. 150.

50 ibid., p. 152.

51 Rebecca Chopp, The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God (Crossroad, New York, 1991), p. 32.

52 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 220.

53 It has been pointed out to me that there is little difference between the signs '-' and '*' in terms of the functions they are intended to carry out. Either way, the term 'God' is intended to be destabilised. Schüssler Fiorenza does not argue the case for preferring one way of signing over the other. She only noted that she defers to Jewish feminists who argue that the earlier notation is offensive, "conservative" and "reactionary". See op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 191. Schüssler Fiorenza does not reflect on the differences or similarities between '-' and '*'.

frame of reference".[54] The point, however, is that Schüssler Fiorenza seeks "to destabilise our way of thinking and speaking about G*d".[55]

I will argue in a later section that for Schüssler Fiorenza the givenness of G*d is never in dispute.[56] Rather, the nature or kind of G*d revealed in rhetorical inquiry is what is at stake in her work. As I remarked at the beginning of this chapter, two theoretical perspectives are in tension here. The sign 'G*d' might be destabilising yet it represents a given which is an epistemological mystery. What is given is, however, problematic: the 'reality' of G*d underlies androcentric, oppressive structures.

> Through feminist political-religious struggles for liberation the ekklesia of wo/men seeks to mediate divine "revelation"; it makes experientially available the 'reality' of the life-giving power of G*d in the midst of death-dealing power of kyriarchal oppression and dehumanization. G*d's power for salvation must 'reveal' itself as active in the struggles for survival and well-being of women living at the bottom of kyriarchal pyramidal oppressions.[57]

As I read Schüssler Fiorenza, it is in the relationship between wo/men and the ekklesia gynaikon mediated by the logic of democracy, that 'G*d' emerges and is revealed. However, such a conceptualisation of the Divine creates a dilemma in Schüssler Fiorenza's work which is not easy to resolve. On the one hand, Schüssler Fiorenza's 'G*d' is a relational concept constituted by a believing community through its discursive practices and guided by biblical interpretation. In this sense, G*d is the mirror of the ekklesia. Yet on the other hand, G*d seems also to be separable from the ekklesia, as if G*d were a 'reality' independent of discursive practice. Since Schüssler Fiorenza claims that women's experiences are germane to developing a feminist theology, and since she has also implied that the inclusion of women's experience more adequately reflects 'reality' because such an account would not 'deny or repress the historical activity

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54 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 191.

55 ibid.

56 See op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 6, where she comments that she is not concerned with the existence of G-d, but '*"what kind of G-d"* the Bible proclaims and Christians believe".

57 ibid., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 28.

of the subordinated "others'",[58] the relation between those experiences and a transcendent Divine should be interrogated. Such an investigation should, however, be conducted in light of Schüssler Fiorenza's claims about women and the 'natural', to which I now turn.

The Natural and Women

Schüssler Fiorenza's desire to de-naturalise the sex/gender system is in keeping with much feminist theory which has argued that sex/gender is socially constructed as a binary system which privileges the male over the female.[59] As a social construct, sex/gender is contingent. In being contingent, 'it' is changeable. If 'it' is changeable, then one needs to alter one's socialisation practices and sex/gender oppression will be eliminated.[60]

But Schüssler Fiorenza's concerns are deeper than this, for she also maintains, as I have pointed out, that the idea of the sex /gender dualistic system itself is a misconstrual of a wider problem: alone, sex/gender cannot account for the totality of oppressions in society. Theorists like Rosemary Radford Ruether have argued that sex/gender is the foundational oppression from which all other oppressions develop.[61] Instead, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, the sex/gender system is part of a systematic oppressive structure which includes race, class and colonialism which are also thought of as natural. Hence, to talk about sex/gender without talking about these other equally important oppressors, is to affirm that sex/gender dualism is **the**, not **a** primary oppressor.

I mentioned above that Schüssler Fiorenza appears to think of 'natural' 'essential' 'given' and 'common sense' as co-extensive. At the very least she conflates their

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58 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 91.

59 See, for example, op. cit., Spelman, Inessential Woman; Moira Gatens, Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality (Polity Press, Cambridge UK, 1991); Michèle Le Dœuff, Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc. (trans. Trista Selous) (Blackwell, Oxford & Cambridge MA, 1991); Genevieve Lloyd, The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy (Methuen University Paperbacks, London, 1984).

60 Moira Gatens makes this point about contingency in "A Critique of the Sex Gender Distinction" in Sneja Gunew (ed.) A Reader in Feminist Knowledge (Routledge, London & New York, 1991).

61 op. cit., Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, *passim.*

meanings. What Schüssler Fiorenza actually means by 'de-naturalising' is never transparent, for what she means by the 'natural' is never clear in the first place. She talks of the 'natural' in terms both of common sense and 'the given' and implies that the common sense **is** the given.[62] For her the ideas of the 'natural, the 'common sense' and the 'given' are all linked in one essentialising program of making everything the same, a commitment to the logic of identity.[63]

She consistently contrasts essentialism with constructionism, another term the meaning of which she never makes clear. She claims that sex/gender differences are 'represented as natural, biological, universal "givens" although they are in reality merely signifying practices'.[64] Hence for her, the 'natural' has at least two aspects: what is thought of as biologically given (pre-discursive or independent of discourse); and what is socially constructed over the 'givenness' of the 'biological'. This is precisely Grosz's interpretation of constructionism which I introduced earlier. There is a rough correspondence between these two perspectives and the distinctions also made earlier, between the real essence and the nominal essence of Locke. The 'biological given' has a totalising or universalising application, yielding the idea that there is a universal, real essence possessed by all women. The socially constructed over that 'biological given' again universalises, but this time in terms of discursive practices which yield nominal essences constructed contingently through discourse. Thus both views are essentialist. It is worth recalling that these are the two ways in which I argued one might think of Daly as essentialist. On either count, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, each recommends itself as common sense and as 'natural' and 'given'.

Schüssler Fiorenza argues that both essentialist views reinscribe and revalorise the feminine.[65] Her way of dealing with essentialism, either nominalist or real, is to promote, as a working model, an idea of social constructionism which does not universalise in terms of depending upon the idea of essence. Schüssler Fiorenza's use

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62 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 104, p. 106 and *passim.*

63 ibid., "Justa", *passim.*

64 ibid., p. 112.

65 ibid.

of constructionism argues that discursive practices produce social 'realities' like sex/gender, class and race, a position argued by Butler and Grosz , for example.[66] This idea of social constructionism, analogous to Scott's notion of experience, is responsible for the production of subject positions within socio-political frameworks like kyriarchy. Just as the latter insists that experience is what is in need of explanation and should not be thought of as **the** explanation, so Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that sex/gender, class and race are created through discursive practices. In this way she hopes to escape the Western dependence upon supposedly natural categories for its ontological foundations.

Schüssler Fiorenza refers to the work of Teresa L. Ebert[67] and Tamsin Lorraine[68] neither of whose theories, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, "operates within the Western essentialist paradigm" and which do not understand "gender as an attribute of anatomy. Instead, both strategies understand gender identity as an effect of one's discursive positioning and strategies"[69] and each project "understands women's gender oppression as primary and originary oppression".[70] Since Schüssler Fiorenza does not believe that gender is the primary oppression, it is not her intention to use Ebert and Lorraine *tout court*. Rather, what interests her is Lorraine's articulating "a self-identity which is continually transforming"[71] and Ebert's contextualising of signification in terms of "mapping of patriarchal ideology".[72]

Further, social constructionism emerges, in Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet where Schüssler Fiorenza takes up Rosemary Hennessy's attempt 'to develop an "analytic" that extends post-modern and feminist critiques of the centred subject

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66 op. cit., Grosz, Volatile Bodies; op. cit., Butler, Gender Trouble.

67 Teresa L. Ebert, "The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity and Postmodern Feminist Cultural Theory" in Cultural Critique, 10, 1988.

68 Tamsin E. Lorraine, Gender, Identity and the Production of Meaning (Westview Press, Boulder, 1990).

69 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 108.

70 ibid.

71 ibid., p. 109.

72 ibid., p. 113.

without giving up a commitment to the possibility of transformative social change'[73] as well as Hennessy's articulation of discourse, specifically history and materialist feminism as ideology.[74]

Underlying her extensive use of these and other theorists is her drive to dislodge 'natural or 'common sense' understandings from their hegemonic moorings which she believes to be discursive, socio-political constructions engendered by kyriarchy. Since these scholars acknowledge the centrality of discursive practices within socio-political groupings both for the constitution of groups as a whole and of the individuals who make up the groups, it is little wonder that Schüssler Fiorenza finds them useful. But Hennessy, for example, is not convinced that categories are as neatly definable and discreetly dichotomising as Schüssler Fiorenza sometimes appears to think they are. Hence Hennessy writes:

> It seems to me, however, that for all of the invocations of "politics" in studies that have addressed the "discursive construction of the subject," we still have very few rigorous theoretical formulations of exactly what these terms mean.[75]

That is not to say that Schüssler Fiorenza is insensitive to the vagueness and ambiguities of language: quite to the contrary, as my exposition shows. On one level, Schüssler Fiorenza appeals to an unarticulated assumption about the rôle of social construction and interpretation: that everything is always already interpreted.[76] That is to say, from this perspective, there is no 'natural' because discursive practices and constructs impose themselves into our understandings from the very first: there is no "transcendent existing apart from, and identifiable independently of, any social practices

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[73] op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 25.

[74] See Rosemary Hennessy, Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse (Routledge, New York; Chapman & Hall, London, 1993), "Introduction", p. xvii; and op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza., Jesus: Miriam's Child, pp. 25 - 26.

[75] op. cit., Hennessy, Materialist Feminism, p. xiii.

[76] See Kevin Hart, The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England & Sydney, 1989), p. 22.

whatsoever".[77] Schüssler Fiorenza argues against the idea that the 'natural' is 'independent of language', pre-existing discursive practices. By implication she reads and argues against a conception of the 'natural' as that which cannot or does not fall within the constraints of language, what is independently 'real', independent that is, of social (discursive) practices. She rejects such a conceptualisation because she holds that concepts are embedded in socio-political discursive practices which have a vested interest in preserving their hegemony. In other words, that one thinks of 'woman', for example, as a 'natural' category, valorises the secondary status accorded to many women. For this reason, Schüssler Fiorenza's rejection of nominal essence is paradoxical. As I argued in chapter 1, the idea of nominal essence is the basis upon which social constructionism is founded. It seems then, that Schüssler Fiorenza wants to reject an explicit originary component of her own theorising, while continuing to use the theory as a whole.

My claim is that Schüssler Fiorenza's use of social construction as a feature of her conceptual framework should be thought of as an attempt to deny the category of the 'natural' and therefore to deny the 'natural' as a foundation for social constructionist theories. Hence, use of social constructionist theory is for her a means of arguing against the ideas of both nominal and real essence. One should see her project as a denial that there is a 'natural' world, a 'real' world independent of discourse, upon which one maps one's discursive practices. She retains the socio-political as a discursive system and denies that it has any 'natural' or common sense or 'given' basis. But she also disavows the historical origins of her favoured position: socio-political discursive construction.

Along with the claim that 'common sense' assumptions and value judgements (aesthetic, moral, political) are socially constructed, Schüssler Fiorenza argues that facts and cultural differences are likewise socially constructed. She also makes the much stronger claim that what we take to be 'natural' characteristics (for example secondary sex characteristics) are socially constructed. This should be read in conjunction with her primary claim that the sex/gender system, as well as the class and race system are

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77 Nancy Fraser, Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory (Polity Press, Cambridge UK, 1989), pp. 59-60.

socially constructed. For her, "language is not a reflection of reality but rather a socio-cultural linguistic system".[78] She argues for example that the:

> . . . cultural sex/gender system "naturalizes" the category "sex" as biologically given rather than as discursively constructed. It does not take into account that primary and secondary physical sex differences are not "biological facts" but are also discursively constructed. For instance, common sense has it that facial hair is a male physical secondary sex characteristic. This common place assumption conceals, however, that it is discursively constructed. In order to uphold the ostensibly male standard, a multibillion dollar cosmetic industry strives to eradicate all facial hair in women. Anatomical physical differences are as discursively constructed and socially maintained as are cultural sex differences.[79]

It is here that Schüssler Fiorenza most clearly articulates the inference from "one cannot give a theory independent description of things" to "there are no theory independent things", to which I referred earlier. Not only is she claiming that system, differences and facts are discursively constructed, but her claim seems also to be that so-called natural characteristics themselves are socially constructed. This stronger claim amounts to a possible reading which argues not only that there are no theory independent things, but that there is only theory. Material objects, things, are eliminated from one's ontology, to be replaced by the idea that theory is the origin of all that there is. For example, the mind produces all of our ideas including the idea that there is an independently existing material world. In other words, it is possible to read Schüssler Fiorenza here in terms of linguistic idealism: there is only discourse. Sexual characteristics on this account, are not independent of the ideas we have of them. They are constructed in their entirety through discursive practice and the belief that ideas constitute all that there is.[80] I prefer to discount such a reading because, as I have been arguing, Schüssler Fiorenza wants to claim that the natural is **in** language, that there is no 'transcendent'. In other words, Schüssler Fiorenza does not deny the existence of things: she simply denies their existence independent of language.

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[78] op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 161.

[79] ibid., p. 40.

[80] See, for example, George Berkeley, The Principles of Human Knowledge [and] Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous (ed. with an introd. by G.J. Warnock) (Collins, London, 1962).

In contrast to this, Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that "the relationship between language and reality is not a given but constructed in discourse".[81] Here Schüssler Fiorenza appears to be distinguishing between 'reality' and language by positing that 'they' are relational. The problem is that what Schüssler Fiorenza means by her claim that language is not a reflection of 'reality' is disputable. She could mean either that there is no 'reality' which language reflects: that 'reality' is itself a social construct. If that is the case, then language and 'reality' are one and are not separable. Or, she could be arguing that language does not reflect reality because it cannot, as she does when she argues that human language cannot capture the reality of G*d.

How then is one to understand her claim that language is not a reflection of 'reality'? The contested claims are:

a) Language is not a reflection of 'reality'; rather language constructs 'reality'.

and

b) Language and 'reality' are independent of each other.

If claim a) is read without the rider ("rather language constructs reality") then a) and b) need not be interpreted as inconsistent. Read together, however, the two claims are inconsistent: language cannot both construct 'reality' and be simultaneously independent of 'reality'. In the required sense, language **is** reality. But what counts as 'reality' for Schüssler Fiorenza?

I argued earlier that Schüssler Fiorenza subscribes to a view that 'reality' is open to more adequate accounts.[82] Certainly her accounts of sex/gender, class and race deny their 'reality' independent of language in terms of differences, facts and characteristics. If it is the case that characteristics are socially constructed, if, for example, secondary sex characteristics are not 'real' independent of discourse, then what is it that is open to a more adequate account? Schüssler Fiorenza implies that since her project is not totally relative, then there must be **something objective** which admits of more or less adequate accounts in terms of truth.[83] In other words, Schüssler Fiorenza is keen to retain a notion

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81 ibid., p. 161.

82 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, pp. 90 - 91.

83 ibid.

of objectivity while arguing for a social constructionist stance which invokes the idea that "access to reality is always mediated through language".[84]

Having argued, however, that language is not a reflection of reality and that the 'natural' which is supposed to reflect 'reality' is discursively produced, of course Schüssler Fiorenza must argue that 'reality' is always mediated by language. But on this view, there is no 'reality' over and beyond language, no objective something, no 'reality' independent of language. Hence, language must mediate itself. And if that is the case her reification of 'reality' as that which is external to language, that which is objective, is puzzling.

It is arguable then, that Schüssler Fiorenza's notion of reality operates at several different levels. On one level there is a notion of 'objective reality' to which language more or less has access. At this level, different and perhaps competing accounts, say of historical events can be given, yielding some adequate and some more adequate accounts. What counts as 'adequate' here will depend on the number of perspectives which are surveyed, but the truth conditions for saying that some accounts are more adequate, are undisclosed. Her reconstruction of Christian women's origins would fall into this camp. The relation between language and 'reality' at this level is constructed through the discursive practices of different cultures: what is significant and meaningful to different cultures at different times.

At another level, the signifying practices of different cultures produce differing accounts of what is natural or given or common sense, depending upon prevailing hegemonic structures. In this case, language does not reflect a 'reality' independent of discourse, because language is actually responsible for producing the idea of what is real in the first place. At this level, the signifying practices of different cultures determine what counts as 'real'. Secondary sexual characteristics would come under this umbrella. And on a third level, there is the 'reality' that is G*d who transcends human experience and language. This latter is a distinctly mystical notion of G*d, and is found throughout the history of theology. Can these accounts of 'reality' be coherently read together and if so, how?

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[84] ibid.

Women's Experience, Embodiment and G*d

In the concluding chapter of Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet, Schüssler Fiorenza makes the following two claims:

> 1) Since G*d radically transcends human experience, no human language, not even that of the Bible, can speak adequately about the divine. The *via negativa* of classic theology stressed that we are not able to say properly who G*d is but must say again and again who G*d is *not.*
>
> and
>
> 2) Since G*d is the G*d of liberation and well-being, an affirmative theological strategy (*via affirmativa*) can positively ascribe to G*d all the Utopian desires of liberation and well being of which countless people dream and hope. . . . Moreover, affirmative discourses about G*d must always be conscious that their language is only analogical since G*d always transcends human desires for liberation and our images of salvation.[85]

In invoking these two conceptualisations of the Divine, Schüssler Fiorenza pinpoints a theological tradition which readily embraces the tension between transcendent and immanent notions of the Divine.[86] It is unproblematic for Schüssler Fiorenza that G*d is 'real' in terms of having objective existence independent of language. What is problematic, however, is that Schüssler Fiorenza has also claimed that some of our major categories: that of the natural and what we take to fall under these categories, for example sex/gender, are socially constructed. Because they are socially constructed, they do not reflect 'reality'. The idea of G*d is excluded from Schüssler Fiorenza's program to de-naturalise. Admittedly, she says that she is concerned to de-naturalise sex/gender, but remember that along with that, she also seeks to de-naturalise class and race as well. On that basis, one might legitimately ask why the idea of G*d should not also be 'de-naturalised'? Here, a reading of 'de-naturalised' would be in terms of challenging **all** androcentric attributions to divinity, including that of G*d's radical transcendence of human experience.

My concern here is not so much to argue that Schüssler Fiorenza is not uncritical about the idea of divinity. One might read her work, in particular her earlier texts, as

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85 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 179.

86 The tension between the ideas of the immanent and the transcendent is identifiable in both the Common and Christian Testaments, and in theological traditions ranging from Plotinus to Gutiérrez. See also Introductory Essay, footnote 11, of this thesis.

specifically aimed at reconstructing non-patriarchal conceptualisations of the Divine. My concern is more with the idea of how we are to think of 'reality' in its relation to experience - women's and men's - and the idea that discursive practice produces some of what we take to be 'real' and what that might mean.

I argued above that G*d is the mirror of the ekklesia because the relationship between the ekklesia and wo/men, mediated by the logic of democracy, is the birth place of the idea of G*d. This G*d is not just emergent however. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, the ekklesia also mediates Divine revelation in its socio-political struggles for freedom and justice.[87] The tension between these two views is analogous to de Lauretis' finding something strange about claiming that real essence is what feminists mean when they talk about essence and proposing instead that feminists actually mean 'nominal essence'. How is one to construe the apparently competing claims that 'G*d is objectively real', and that 'one can positively ascribe to G*d Utopian desires for liberation' within a conceptual framework that also argues that the idea of 'reality' independent of language, is a product of socio-political androcentric hegemony'?

A possible solution lies in arguing that the idea of the objective reality of G*d is dependent upon discursive practice and so Schüssler Fiorenza is mistaken in excluding G*d from that which is to be de-naturalised. This argument would rely on Schüssler Fiorenza's failure to distinguish between the notions of the natural, the given and the common sense. If the idea of G*d is given, as Schüssler Fiorenza seems to hold it is, then there is no reason to suppose that G*d is not socially constructed as is sex/gender. That is to say, Schüssler Fiorenza needs to provide some grounds for holding that some of our categories (like sex/gender, class and race) are socially constructed and others are not.

She also needs to provide some content to the idea of 'reality' independent of language. While she holds that access to 'reality' is always mediated by language, she also holds that language does not reflect 'reality'. If the latter is the case, in what way does language provide us with some access to 'reality'? And then the epistemic question:

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87 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, p. 28.

'How would we know that language does or does not give us access to reality and the extent to which it does?', needs to be raised.

The question of the relation of women's experience to the Divine needs also to be raised. If it is the case that "no human language can adequately speak about the divine", then the inclusion of women's experiences in articulations of Divine intention seems superfluous. Certainly, the claim that perspectives on women's experiences present a different reality seems plausible enough. But if concurrently the claim is that language does not reflect 'reality', it is difficult to see what difference inclusion of women's perspective would make. The relation between women's experience and G*d becomes an arbitrary matter. On the one hand, the epistemic considerations concerning how one would know that women's experience actually does present a different reality come to the fore. On the other, why men's experience has not already adequately comprehended the Divine (perhaps without their even knowing it) must be addressed.

This is where projection theory is extremely important to Schüssler Fiorenza. Her claim that G*d can be the site of the ascription of positive Utopian attributes relates such ascription to the ekklesia. 'The given' on this view, is that G*d is a G*d of liberation and well being. Even though the language of such ascription is analogical, and even though language does not reflect 'reality', it is arguable that within this framework the ekklesia reflects G*d in modelling Divine justice for example. Because language mediates but does not reflect 'reality', and because language is concerned with signifying practices of different cultures, even concepts of G*d must be always already interpreted. That being so, the idea of G*d is conceptually dependent upon, in this case, the projection of the ekklesia. On this basis, G*d becomes the mirror of wo/men and their experiences.

An interpretation like this, however, problematises Schüssler Fiorenza's idea of the separation of language and talk of the independent 'reality' of G*d. It also calls for a closer examination of projection theory. Luce Irigaray specifically acknowledges a debt to Ludwig Feuerbach to whom she turns in order to elaborate her idea that women need their own Divine. In the next chapter, I explore Irigaray's reading of God as the mirror of Man, before moving onto how this can be spelt out in the context of women's experiences and 'reality' independent of language.

CHAPTER 4

BEYOND IRIGARAY: *MIMĒSIS* AND THE POLITICS OF DIVINITY

> The "soul" escapes outside herself, opening up a crack in the cave (une antr'ouverture) so that she may penetrate herself once more. The walls of her prison are broken, the distinction between inside/outside transgressed. In such ex-stasis, she risks losing herself or at least seeing the assurance of her self-identity-as-same fade away . . .[1]

> Irigaray's Divine is not conceived in naturalistic, personal or judgemental terms. God is not totality, unity or origin.[2]

It can be argued that both Mary Daly and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza continue to explore the idea of divinity in terms of unity, totality and origin: the Goddess/G*d represents the origin and the *telos* of all human existence. Working within the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition, however, Luce Irigaray concentrates instead on the idea that women have always been defined in terms of the Other of men. Women, according to Irigaray, need a new concept of divinity for themselves. Accordingly, her project is to investigate the possibility of making a feminine symbolic. Irigaray argues that the development of a feminine symbolic requires the idea of a feminine Divine. Thus her interest might be interpreted as refiguring the Divine in terms of women's experience(s).[3]

In this chapter, I will begin exploring the ways in which Irigaray's psychoanalytic/philosophical discourse might provide a resolution to the tensions we have seen in the work of Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza. I have argued that Daly seems to work within a dualistic framework in which an ontological-linguistic strategy overlies an 'independently real' female body. Schüssler Fiorenza, as we just saw, denies the 'independent reality' of the body on the one hand, claiming that discursive practices are

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[1] Luce Irigaray, "*La Mystérique*", in Speculum Of The Other Woman (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1992), p. 192.

[2] Elizabeth Grosz, Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists (Allen & Unwin, St. Leonard's, 1989), p.159.

[3] See Penelope Deutscher, '"The Only Diabolical Thing About Women . . .": Luce Irigaray on Divinity', in Hypatia, Special Issue: "Feminist Philosophy of Religion" [Nancy Frankenberry & Marilyn Thie (eds.)] 9 (4) (Fall 1994), pp. 88 - 111.

responsible for producing characteristics, facts, and reality; and on the other hand, assumes a 'reality' independent of language to which we have more or less adequate access, as well as an independently real G*d.

On Daly's account it seems possible to speak of 'women as women', as a class of individuals whose main defining characteristic is sex/gender, while this is not the case with Schüssler Fiorenza. Both Daly's and Schüssler Fiorenza's positions depend heavily on implicit accounts of the rôle of language as that which constitutes realities: social, political and religious. Hence for both of them, ontology and language are very closely linked; women are totally or in part products of socio-political discursive practices; and the Divine appears also to be generated, at least in part, by socio-political discursive practices. The body, its relation to discursive practices and its relation to the Divine, remain problematic areas for both Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza. In all of this, women's experience itself remains problematic because while each theorist grants that constructionism is a definitive force, it can be argued that both Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza revalorise dualistic conceptions like essence and language so they do not adequately account for social constructionism in the first place. That is to say, they both believe that language constructs reality, but they remain within the frameworks which they criticise.

Schüssler Fiorenza is one amongst many theorists who have accused Irigaray of essentialism.[4] As I argued in the last chapter, Schüssler Fiorenza maintains that any kind of essentialism, one that proposes a natural essence or one that arises out of discursive practices, or both, is wrong. In my analysis of essentialism in chapter 1, I argued that in the nominalist/realist debate we can find the foundations of the essentialist controversy in feminism. Schüssler Fiorenza's claim that any kind of essentialism, nominalist or real, commits one to revalorising and reinscribing kyriarchal essentialist categories, does not undermine this contention. Paradoxically, one might read her position as an incongruous

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[4] See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation (Beacon Press, Boston, 1992); Monique Plaza,'"Phallomorphic Power" and the Psychology of "woman"' in Ideology and Consciousness, 4 (Autumn 1978), pp. 5 - 35; Toril Moi, "Patriarchal Reflections: Luce Irigaray's looking-glass" in Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (Routledge, London, 1991).

development of this distinction, but Schüssler Fiorenza fails, however, to realise her own debt to nominalism.

In Schüssler Fiorenza's view, Irigaray's positioning herself within the woman/feminine, maternal/feminine discourse commits her to essentialism. As Schüssler Fiorenza reads her, Irigaray is an unrepentant essentialist.[5] Underlying Schüssler Fiorenza's suspicion of Irigaray is her belief that any position which revalorises the feminine reinscribes "the Western kyriarchal sex/gender system".[6] So for Schüssler Fiorenza the mere use of terms (such as 'feminine') appears to constitute revalorising or reinscribing, as I pointed out in chapter 3. Use, then, is theory laden for Schüssler Fiorenza, never value free (which is also the case for Daly and, as we shall see, Irigaray).

In 1989, differences published Luce Irigaray's review of In Memory of Her. Irigaray's review was at once praising and condemnatory of Schüssler Fiorenza. Irigaray noted that she had begun reading "In Memory of Her with astonishment and joy. At last something new on Christianity!"[7] Her initial excitement was, however, tempered by Schüssler Fiorenza's lack of acknowledgement that women are without a Divine of their own. Irigaray's review/critique challenges Schüssler Fiorenza precisely at the point where traditional theology has failed to account for itself: how is one to theorise female embodiment in a religious context where it has always been devalorised in spite of the fact that the Incarnation and Resurrection have been, and remain, central to its beliefs and practices?[8]

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5 For a discussion of the debate about Irigaray's alleged essentialism see Naomi Schor, "Previous Engagements: The receptions of Irigaray" in Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor and Margaret Whitford (eds.), Engaging With Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought (Columbia University Press, New York, 1994).

6 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology (Continuum, New York, 1994), p. 77.

7 Luce Irigaray, "Equal To Whom?", in Naomi Schor & Elizabeth Weed, (eds.) The Essential Difference, Books from Differences Series (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994), p. 63.

8 For some recent feminist readings of the Incarnation, see Susan A. Ross, "God's Embodiment and Women"; Mary Catherine Hilkert, "Experience and Tradition"; and Mary Aquin O'Neill, "The Mystery of Being Human Together", in Catherine Mowry La Cugna (ed.) Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective (Harper, San Francisco, 1993). For a discussion of the Incorporeality of God, see Grace M. Dyck, "Omnipresence and Incorporeality" in Religious Studies, 13 (1977), pp. 85 - 91. See also Grace M. Jantzen [formerly 'Dyck'], God's World, God's Body (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1984). For a response to Jantzen, see Charles Taliaferro "The Incorporeality of God" in Modern Theology, 3 (2) (1987), pp. 179 - 188. For her response to

The relationship between a feminine Divine (Irigaray's term) and a theology of the body[9] has been important in Irigaray's recent writing. This is less of a concern to Schüssler Fiorenza whose main interests are with the socio-political and the communal, rather than the articulation of the embodied subject, as I argued in my previous chapter. This 'rather than' should be read in terms of Schüssler Fiorenza's implicit use of binary oppositional constructions (which she simultaneously seeks to disclaim): the logic of identity (everything is the same) **or** the logic of democracy (the ekklesia), but not both. That is to say, although Schüssler Fiorenza contests binary constructions, she remains within a dualistic framework without recognising that she does so. However, she is very quick to concur with her commentators who think that Irigaray is dualistic in her thinking.

Morny Joy, for example, argues in an article "Equality or Divinity: A False Dichotomy?"[10] that Irigaray's review dichotomises equality and divinity. I do not agree that Irigaray actually does do this, although Schüssler Fiorenza points out that Joy has correctly interpreted her whereas Irigaray has not.[11] In my view, Irigaray is not dualistic or essentialist as Schüssler Fiorenza understand the terms. Irigaray's review suggests that she does not think equality and divinity should be thought of disjunctively.

> The denigration of Christ's incarnation as a sexual being and the use to which that denial is put in the service of sexual hierarchization and exploitation seem to have blocked the understanding of that sexual nature and confined it to the province of patricians and Pharisees. This is what I find most compelling in Fiorenza's theological-historical argument. But, having said that, I think it's something else that interests me in part, namely the fact that a theology of women's liberation establishes as its

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Taliaferro, see "Reply to Taliaferro", in Modern Theology, 3 (2), 1987, pp. 189 - 192. See also, Sallie McFague, "God and the World",Models Of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1987), ch. 3, pp. 59 - 79. See also, Sallie McFague, The Body of God: An Ecological Theology (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993), where she explores the metaphor of the world as God's body. The point I am making, however, is that **female** embodiment is, generally speaking overlooked for two reasons: historically because of sexist assumptions and currently because of the danger of courting essentialism. Luce Irigaray, as we shall see, explores the trope of female embodiment in her discussion of divinity.

[9] For a discussion of the notion of a theology of the body in Catholicism, see op. cit., O'Neill, "The Mystery of Being Human Together", in La Cugna, Freeing Theology, pp. 152 - 155.

[10] Morny Joy, "Equality or Divinity A False Dichotomy?", in Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, 6 (1) (1990), pp. 9 - 24.

[11] In private correspondence to me, Joy has acknowledged that she no longer believes this to be the case.

> priority not equal access to the priesthood, but rather an equal share in the Divine. This means that what I see as manifestation of sexual liberation is God made a couple: man and simply God made man.[12]

My reading of Irigaray here is that when it comes to articulating a liberation theology, it is an equal share in the Divine which is paramount and that precedes ("establishes as its priority") equality in say, a women church, but the two are not exclusive. Irigaray perceives equality and divinity as different issues: equality concerns socio-political structuring and a share in the Divine is ontological and metaphysical. That does not make them necessarily opposed, however they may have been conceived historically.[13]

Schüssler Fiorenza notes that she and Irigaray use "two different discourses" and that the false dichotomy, the disjunction, equality or divinity (which I hold Irigaray does not construct), are not just what is at stake, but "the feminist theoretical shift from the logic of identity to that of democracy".[14] Since Irigaray's declared intention is to fracture[15] what Schüssler Fiorenza calls the logic of identity (Irigaray: the logic of the Same), this is a strange remark for Schüssler Fiorenza to make. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the logic of identity has two primary characteristics: its tendency to think everything as one[16] while simultaneously producing binary oppositional or dualistic terminology.[17] For Schüssler Fiorenza, the logic of identity emphasises the individual over the socio-political cultivating an ethos of self interested pre-occupation which is witnessed by, for example, the

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12 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, "Equal to Whom?", p. 74.

13 For example, this dichotomy might be thought of as analogous to the public/private dichotomy. See Moira Gatens, Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991), *passim.*

14 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 129.

15 For a good discussion of Irigaray's fracturing in relation to dualism and mirroring, see Kathryn Bond Stockton, God Between Their Lips: Desire Between Women in Irigaray, Brontë and Eliot (Stanford University Press, California, 1994), especially "Divine Loss", pp. 49-60, where Bond Stockton discusses fracture, mirrors/mirroring and sameness.

16 op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, p. 139.

17 ibid., and *passim.*

concerns of privileged white women who have a vested interest in maintaining their first world advantage.[18]

Irigaray and Schüssler Fiorenza then, share a similar understanding of the logic of the Same/identity. But the emphasis which Irigaray places on the psychoanalytic and ultimately the symbolic structures of discourse, leads Schüssler Fiorenza to reject her because she reads her as an essentialising feminist. Since Irigaray speaks of the specificity of women, the feminine and women's bodies,[19] Schüssler Fiorenza assumes she must be reinscribing masculine kyriocentric categories. My contention is that this is not the case. Rather, Irigaray uses an essentialist strategy which entails adopting essentialist language, without actually being committed to essentialism as it has been portrayed so far in this thesis.[20] This strategy is the use of *mimēsis*. Schüssler Fiorenza's assumption indicates a lack of understanding of Irigaray's overall project: to explore the possibility of a feminine symbolic, which is not merely imitative of the male symbolic which generates (the concept of) and is imposed upon women.

Irigaray's use of 'woman', 'the feminine' and 'the female' is always already interpreted within the double context of biology (the material) and culture (the discursive). At the same time, she uses these terms deliberately in a mimetic strategy contrived to acknowledge the pervasiveness of the male symbolic and structures. According to Irigaray, women are produced through a male symbolic which renders them the Other,[21] the remainder, the excess of men. Irigaray's usage suggests that it is possible to talk of women as women, as a category defined by sex/gender, without reference to other

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[18] Schüssler Fiorenza quotes Laura Kipnis, "Feminism: The Political Consciousness of Postmodernism?" in Andrew Ross, Universal Abandon?: The Politics of Postmodernism (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988), p. 162, as an instance of someone who holds this view.

[19] For example, the trope of the two lips in Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One (trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke) (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1985), *passim*; and the trope of the cave as uterus in 'Plato's *Hystera*' in op. cit., Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman, pp. 243 - 364.

[20] For discussion of Irigaray as a strategic feminist, see Margaret Whitford, Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine (Routledge, London & New York 1991); op. cit., Grosz, Sexual Subversions; and Naomi Schor, "Previous Engagements", in op. cit., Burke, Carolyn, Schor, Naomi, Whitford, Margaret (eds.) Engaging With Irigaray.

[21] In this she follows de Beaver. See The Second Sex (trans. H. M. Parsley) (Picador Books, London, 1949).

factors like class and race, because of her distinct allusions to the female body. For her, women's experience is something more than constructed through socio-political discursive practices: indeed 'woman' is a universal sex/gender category which is related to sex/gendered bodies.

In this chapter I explore Irigaray's use of metaphor and *mimēsis* in relation to the idea of women, as she examines the possibility of a feminine Divine. Echoing Grosz, I emphasise that Irigaray's project is not onto-theological. Her conception of the Divine is not concerned with elaborating being, with teleology, with genesis. Grosz comments that Irigaray's "notion of God is an inversion and displacement of its theological origins".[22] On this reading, Irigaray does not set out to recover the "naturalistic, personal or judgemental" God to whom Grosz refers and who has figured in the theological ruminations and history of men. Irigaray's Divine is situated in the totality of women's experience(s) as Other to men where the possibility of a Divine is the possibility of a feminine symbolic. Women's experience and the Divine cannot be isolated. If for example, women's experience of the Divine is lack, then it is in lack that the Divine will be encountered. I take up these themes throughout this and in the next chapter.

My discussion refers to, and where appropriate elucidates, Feuerbach's and Lacan's influence on Irigaray.[23] I assume that they have been significant in Irigaray's subversive project of imagining a possible feminine symbolic and Divine. Clearly the place we first encounter the influence of Lacan is in the symbolic.

Irigaray claims that there is no feminine symbolic and that women exist through a symbolic which is masculine.[24] She also claims that women have no Divine of their own and that they should develop their own sex-specific Divine in relation to a feminine

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22 op. cit., Grosz, Sexual Subversions, p. 159.

23 The Lacanian influence on Irigaray is well documented. See for example, op. cit., Joy, "Equality or Divinity: A False Dichotomy?"

24 For discussions of the symbolic see op. cit., Whitford, Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine; op. cit., Grosz, Sexual Subversions; and Tina Chanter, Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Re-writing of the Philosophers (Routledge, New York & London, 1995). This is a 'standard' line argued by many commentators on Irigaray. See, for example, op.cit. Grosz, Sexual Subversions.

symbolic.[25] Grosz, as I remarked, notes that Irigaray rejects formulating God in traditional terms.[26] Irigaray's elucidation of the Divine is influenced by Christian traditions, discussing as she does Christ's incarnation and the rôle of Mary, the Mother of God for example. Concurrently, she is influenced by Feuerbach's anthropological theology, rejecting the kind of onto-theology (theology of being)[27] of which we have seen elements in Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza.

Irigaray's discussion of the possibility of a feminine symbolic also has important consequences for deciding what will count as women's experience, for a feminine symbolic is necessary to the construction of the concepts 'woman'. A sexually specific Divine provides the impetus for understanding the possibility of a **feminine** feminine and a feminine symbolic.

Sexual Sameness and The Divine

Throughout this chapter, I refer to the psychoanalytic concept, the symbolic, which Luce Irigaray has adapted from Lacan.[28] Irigaray, interpreting Lacan and Freud, has argued that women have no symbolic of their own, that the symbolic through which one represents and interprets one's meanings is masculine and patriarchal, and assumes

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[25] "Il manque à la femme un mirroir pour devenir femme. Avoir un Dieu et devenir son genre vont de pair. Dieu est l'autre dont nous avons absolument besoin . . . Un dieu *féminin* est encore à venir . . ." Luce Irigaray, "Femmes Divines" in Sexes et Parentés (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1987), p. 79. (Woman has no mirror wherewith to become a woman. Having a God and becoming one's gender go hand in hand. God is the other that we absolutely cannot be without . . . A female god is still to come . . ." Luce Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 67.

[26] op. cit., Grosz, Sexual Subversions, p. 155: "Instead of seeing Irigaray as a 'born-again' Christo-feminist, her notion of God, or gods, and the divine is part of general strategy of deconstructive textual reading of philosophical (not simply theological) texts. This is an attempt to replace a metaphysical masculinist onto-theology, in which man defines and is not in turn defined by, God with the idea of sexual (and presumably cultural) specificity. Not a single, paternal God, whose unity is and universality sweeps away a polytheistic pantheon, but sexually specific gods, gods who represent the extension and perfection, the infinite becoming of sexually specific subjects".

[27] ibid., p. 155.

[28] Luce Irigaray, *"Questions"* in This Sex Which Is Not One. See Whitford, Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine, for a comprehensive discussion of Irigaray's use of the symbolic. See also "Luce Irigaray and the Ethics of Alterity" in op. cit., Grosz, Sexual Subversions; Jacques Lacan, Ecrits: A Selection (trans. Alan Sheridan) (Tavistock Routledge, London, 1989): "The function and field of language in psychoanalysis" especially "II Symbol and language as structure and limit of the psychoanalytic field" and "III The resonances of interpretation and the time of the subject in psychoanalytic technique".

women's sameness rather than their difference.[29] The masculine symbolic is patriarchal,[30] in so far as it represents power relations amongst and between men who exchange women as commodities in a society dominated by the Law of the Father.[31] The primary symbols of that symbolic are the Phallus and the Father. Irigaray has claimed that women need to make their own female symbolic in which the feminine can become.

My basic assumption is that the context for the meaningfulness of theistic experience and philosophical discourse in the Hebrew traditions, is the male symbolic. Its symbols are not sex-neutral and they represent the interests, power relations and interpretations of men. The God of Moses and subsequently the God of Christians and the God of the Philosophers,[32] for example, connote the expression, understanding and belief which is embedded in the generation of a male symbolic which represents itself as neutral. The supposedly neutral symbolic engenders the apparently sexed/gendered subject and the purported neutrality ultimately, of reason itself.[33]

The symbolic does not reflect feminine consciousness, a feminine subject, but encourages women to believe in the neutrality of the system in which lies their psychoanalytic origins. This, in part, is what Irigaray means when she speaks of the metaphysics of Same: that there is one common origin for all sexed/gendered positions.[34] Irigaray argues that the feminine - persisting and pervasive - needs to be radically cross-

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29 See op. cit., Irigaray, "Any Theory of the "Subject" in Speculum of the Other Woman, *passim*; and "Plato's *Hystera*", p. 357.

30 Irigaray does not represent patriarchy as a relationship between members of a gendered society *per se*. As I read her, she understands patriarchy as the rule of the masculine paternal, which is to say the father, as bearer of the phallus, rules and is symbolically (and practically) privileged in a society of his own making. The masculine symbolic therefore encompasses patriarchy. For a discussion of patriarchy as a relationship amongst gendered members of society, see op. cit., Gatens, Philosophy and Feminism. For a critique of patriarchy see op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said. I take the ideas of the 'symbolic' and the male 'symbolic' to be co-extensive.

31 op. cit., Irigaray, *"Women on the Market"* and "*Commodities amongst Themselves*" in This Sex Which Is Not One.

32 See Introductory Essay, pp. 8 ff., of this thesis.

33 See Genevieve Lloyd, The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy (Methuen University Paperbacks, London, 1984); Sandra Harding, The Science Question in Feminism (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY & London, 1986); Evelyn Fox Keller, "Gender and Science: an Update" in Secrets of Life, Secrets of Death: Essays on Language, Gender and Science (Routledge, New York, 1992).

34 Compare this with the Genesis story in which the woman is produced from Adam's rib.

examined and explored. Her intuition that it is the symbolic which needs interrogation for it is the symbolic system - structure and content - which engenders the eternal feminine or any notion of the feminine, is a radical insight. The notions of woman/female/feminine are situated within, and arise from, the male symbolic which is supposedly neutral.[35]

One of Irigaray's central claims is that women do indeed need their own Divine to develop their own symbolic. Let me emphasise then, that the pursuit and development of a female symbolic presupposes a philosophy of sexual difference which does not rest easily - nor is it intended to - with traditional theological conceptions of divinity, arising as they have from a male symbolic, the philosophical foundations of which have been clearly stated.[36] Irigaray claims that there is only one sex, that the feminine in which women primarily participate, has been symbolised only as a masculine adjunct, the 'not' that the masculine is, the Other of the Same.[37]

The concept of sexual sameness dominates traditional metaphysics. In this Irigaray and Schüssler Fiorenza are in complete agreement. Sexual sameness constitutes all humans as **essentially** one kind of subject: the rational masculine projection, the purportedly sex-neutral subject. How can this be changed without appealing to essentialist and dualistic notions of sex/gender?

Women's Experience, the Masculine Symbolic and the Divine

I argued in earlier chapters that feminist theologians have maintained, or assumed, that feminist theologies ought to be based upon women's experiences.[38] Apart

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35 op. cit., Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One. Irigaray announces that of course we do not know what masculine discourse is, there is no Other, p. 140.

36 See the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, chapter 1, p. 47, of this thesis. See also Caroline Whitbeck, "Theories of Sex Difference" in Carol C. Gould and Marx W. Wartovsky, (eds.), Women and Philosophy: Toward a Theory of Liberation (Putnam, New York, 1980), for a discussion of the Pythagorean Monad and Dyad.

37 See Rosi Braidotti,"Radical Philosophies of Sexual Difference: Luce Irigaray" in Polity Reader in Gender Studies (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994), pp. 62 - 70, for a discussion of this point. See also op. cit., Whitford, Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine, p. 50 and p. 104.

38 See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (SCM Press, London, 1983); Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology (SCM Press, London, 1983). For discussions of the notion of experience in relation to feminist theory see Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (Macmillan, London, 1984), p. 159; Joan W. Scott, "Experience" in Judith P.

from considerations about the semantics of the terms 'woman' and 'experience' which I have been discussing throughout, it follows that if it is the case that 'woman', 'female' and 'feminine' are concepts from within the male symbolic, then to speak of women's experiences is to speak of experiences which are constructed out of the meanings implicit in that symbolic. Women's experience must be **masculine** feminine experience, to use Irigaray's expression.

On this account, a theology based upon women's experience must, therefore, be a theology whose structures and contents are inalienably male. Hence, for women to think of community or immanence, for example, as the experiential basis upon which to build a theology, is for women to subscribe to patriarchal, masculinist notions of womanhood, femininity and the Divine. In Sexism and God-talk for example, one of Radford Ruether's primary categories is 'women's experience'. Ruether argues that "Human experience is the starting point and ending point of the hermeneutical circle".[39] She goes on to argue that "the uniqueness of feminist theology lies not in its use of the criterion of experience but rather in its use of *women's* experience, which has been almost entirely shut out of theological reflection in the past" [her emphasis].[40]

Radford Ruether acknowledges that women's experience has been silenced, omitted and overlooked in the mainstream traditions. But Radford Ruether does not take a step back and examine what she means by 'women's experience'. She takes it that the

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Butler & Joan W. Scott (eds.), Feminists Theorize the Political (Routledge, New York, 1992); bell hooks, feminist theory from margin to center (South End Press, Boston,1987); Deborah H. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology", in Micheline R. Malson, Jean F. O'Barr, Sarah Westphal-Wihl & Mary Wyer (eds.) in Feminist Theory in Practice and Process (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989); Anne Pattel-Gray,"Not yet Tiddas: An Aboriginal Womanist Critique of Australian Church Feminism" in Maryanne Confoy, Dorothy A. Lee & Joan Nowotny, Freedom and Entrapment: Women Thinking Theology (Dove Publications, Melbourne, 1995).

[39] See op. cit., Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-talk, p. 12.

[40] ibid., p. 13.

concept is self-evident and that it is somehow a 'pure' category. For Radford Ruether, it would seem, women's experience is explanatory and not in need of explanation. Radford Ruether's account typifies the kind which Scott rejects.

Experience, thought of as that which explains, emanates from the idea of a subject which is pre-given.[41] The idea that the subject is pre-given implies an essential nature which is stereotypically and essentially feminine. On this view, women's experiences, that they are supposedly caring, nurturing and gentle for example, is linked to women's biological functions as mother, the eternal feminine. Schüssler Fiorenza is correct in claiming that one should reject this kind of characterisation as essentially true of women. Irigaray takes the important step of linking those qualities to the male symbolic. Within the male symbolic they are self-evidently true: women are no more than what is already structurally, symbolically, given.

Recall for instance that in the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, male and female are opposed and the qualities on each side of the Table are associated with each other. Women's experience, I argued, is defined in terms of the negative Other against the male. The female is the privative of the male and for this reason, women, conceived of as necessarily female, lack specific woman's essence. The system within which the female is defined, however, is itself male, insofar as it privileges its own positive attributes. Because the female is defined against the male and in terms of the privative, the male includes the female.

On this account, women's experience as a point of departure for a female symbolic, is fraught with the difficulty of masculine inclusion of the feminine. The masculinity of the symbolic has repercussions not only for the status of the feminine: given that the symbolic is masculine, its God, too, is masculine. Irigaray sets out deliberately to refigure the Divine in terms of the feminine. She wants to make a God for women. Irigaray remarks that:

> All men (especially according to Feuerbach) and all women, except when they remain submitted to the logic of the essence of man, should imagine a God for themselves, an objective and subjective place or path for the

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[41] David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature (ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge) (Clarenden Press, Oxford, 1968), Book I, "Of the Understanding", Section VI "Of Personal Identity", pp. 251 - 263.

> possible assemblage of the self in space and time: a unity of instinct, heart and knowledge, a unity of nature and spirit, a condition of the homeland and of sainthood. Only a God can save us and guard over us. The feeling or experience of a positive, objective and glorious existence for our subjectivity is necessary for us. Such as a God who helps and guides us in our becoming, who holds the measure of our limits - women - and our relation to the infinite, which inspires our endeavours. Not only as an *opposition to or critique of but as a position consisting of new values,* "essentially" Divine ones [her emphasis].[42]

Irigaray's comments bring into sharp focus her recognition that sociology is not enough. Her remark about being quickly bored with sociology when she expects the Divine, which I used at the beginning of this thesis, finds its rationale in the above quotation. For Irigaray, the Divine is the site of resolution of opposites: objective and subjective, intuition and reason, spirit and nature, finitude and infinity. I take up this point further in chapter 5. The 'new values' which these dichotomies supersede and create, re-position woman's potential outside the male symbolic, and are intimately tied up with the development of a potential feminine symbolic. Those values are expressions of the feminine Divine.

Irigaray does not believe that women should simply adopt the masculine projection of the feminine and consonantly, she does not believe that women should adopt the paternal masculine God. Instead, women should seek a feminine Divine in which new values can be elaborated. The two are intimately connected, for she maintains that if women develop a feminine Divine, and therefore a feminine subject, women will also develop a feminine symbolic. The development of a feminine Divine is a condition for the development of a feminine symbolic.[43] This is the moment at which Feuerbach's contention that man projects his own God is deeply significant for Irigaray. She does not read the term "man" generically. She reads it as sex-specific and takes this up to make her announcement that woman needs her own God.

Quoting Feuerbach's "God is the mirror of man", Irigaray alleges that "Woman has no mirror wherewith to become a woman. Having a God and becoming one's gender go

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[42] Luce Irigaray, Divine Women (trans. of *'Femmes Divines'*, Stephen Muecke) (Local Consumption, Sydney, 1986), pp. 8 & 9.

[43] See op. cit., Deutscher,"'The Only diabolic thing about women . . .".

hand in hand. God is the other which we absolutely cannot be without."[44] Elizabeth Grosz implies that Irigaray has no more than a Feuerbachian project in mind when she posits the necessity of a Divine for women.[45] Irigaray positions herself more critically in relation to Feuerbach than this. She argues that the paternal masculine God[46] has indeed developed from a mirroring/projecting process in which men have engaged in order to displace their finitude. But she sees women's project as developing an ideal for themselves, a positivity which is a condition for developing a feminine symbolic.

If we grant Irigaray's assertion that having a God and becoming one's gender go hand in hand, and that the symbolic is not gender neutral but masculine, it must be the case that men already have their God. Because she reads "man" as sex-specific, however, it is not the case that women have a God of their own.

But what is it that Feuerbach is claiming when he argues that God is the mirror of man? He argues:

> Religion is human nature reflected, mirrored in itself. That which exists has necessarily a pleasure, a joy in itself, loves itself and loves itself justly; to blame it because it loves itself is to reproach it because it exists. To exist is to assert oneself, to affirm oneself, to love oneself; he to whom life is a burthen, rids himself of it. Where, therefore, feeling is not depreciated and repressed, as with the Stoics, where existence is awarded to it, there also is a religious power and significance already conceded to it, there also is it already exalted to that stage in which it can mirror and reflect itself, in which it can project its own image of God. God is the mirror of man.[47]

Feuerbach alleges that God is the projected limits of human consciousness, mirrored back as the Other. The idea of human consciousness/self-consciousness as that

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[44] op. cit., Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies, p. 67.

[45] In Irigaray and the Divine (Local Consumption, Sydney, 1986), p. 12, Grosz (formerly 'Gross') consistently emphasises the *projected* nature of the feminine divine. "Irigaray's God is neither naturalistic, nor personal, neither forgiving nor judgemental; it is not the totality, unity, origin or purpose of the world. It is the principle of the ideal, the projection the (sexed) subject onto the figure of the perfection, an e.g. - ideal specific to that subject . . .".

[46] That is to say, the God **of** the Fathers and the God who **is** Father.

[47] Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity (trans. Marian Evans) (John Chapman, London, 1854), p. 62. Feuerbach develops this mirror/projection theory at length. See in particular Part 1, ch. 11, "The True or Anthropological Essence of Religion", but his claims are clearly set out throughout his book.

which constructs all human experience, its pervasive presence and action as the very constituter of human being itself, subtends Feuerbach's theological anthropology. For him, the possession of reflective consciousness distinguishes man from all other creatures. Note his debt to Aristotle who, as we saw in chapter 1, regarded the possession of deliberative capacity, which I read as analogous to the idea of reflective consciousness, as present only in men (of a certain class). Also note that experience is that which is constructed, not that which constructs. One could read this in the light of Scott's analysis of experience.

In the Introduction to The Essence of Christianity, Feuerbach argues that religion is "identical with the distinctive characteristic of man, is then identical with self-consciousness - with the consciousness man has of his nature."[48] He claims that:

> . . . consciousness is essentially infinite in its nature. The consciousness of the infinite is nothing else than the infinity of the consciousness; or, in the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for his object the infinity of his own nature.[49]

In being the mirror of man, God is the mirror of man's infinity: God is the ultimate expression of human limitlessness. The problem with traditional theology as Feuerbach sees it, is that man has mistakenly construed God as an existence separate, distinct, other than human consciousness, an independent **existent**. Hence, man has conceived of God as a perfected, mirror **image** of himself, but also as a reversal of, and separation from, his own consciousness. In other words man has reified his infinite consciousness: he has made of God a distinct, different being.

> Religion is the disuniting of man from himself: he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself. God is not what man is - man is not what God is. God is the infinite, man the finite being; God is perfect, man imperfect; God eternal, man temporal; God almighty, man weak; God holy, man sinful. God and man are extremes: God is the absolute positive, the sum of all realities; man the absolutely negative, comprehending all negations.[50]

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[48] ibid., p.2.

[49] ibid.

[50] ibid., p. 32. One wonders if the God/man relation might be seen analogously as the Man/Woman relation where Man is God and Woman is man.

Feuerbach insists, however, that it is not the case that God does not exist. If man were to deny the existence of God, man must deny the existence of his consciousness, and must also deny the existence of feeling, or any other human attribute, quality, disposition.[51]

The existence of God is therefore "guaranteed" by the existence of infinite human consciousness which itself projects the infinite; and by the existence of the range of human attributes and potentialities which consciousness manifests.[52] A consequence of Feuerbach's position is that "man cannot get beyond his true nature".[53] But God exists as the **idealised** projection of consciousness. This is the point at which Irigaray enters into the debate.

Feuerbach maintains that qualities, what we predicate of something, constitute that something as a subject.[54] God, therefore, is not an 'empty' subject (if such be possible), for God's attributes constitute him as a subject.[55] On this basis the *via negativa* is an untenable theological position for Feuerbach, for one cannot conceive of a subject whose predicates are not known.[56] This might be compared with Schüssler Fiorenza's claim about the analogical nature of God-talk. All the subject-constituting-predicates of God are predicates of man: they cannot be any other. Human consciousness can comprehend only what it is capable of producing from itself. This leads Feuerbach to

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51 ibid., p. 10.

52 In the context of what she perceives as the god/man schism, Deutscher takes up the idea of god as guarantor in Irigaray's texts. Deutscher's argument involves the idea that the nature of the god/man relation explicitly assumes a severing of the Divine and man. See op. cit., Deutscher, "'The Only diabolic thing about women . . .", pp. 93 - 94.

53 op. cit., Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, p. 11.

54 ibid., §2, "The Essence of Religion considered generally", pp. 12-42. He acknowledges his debt to Aristotle earlier on.

55 ibid., p. 24.

56 ibid., p. 34. The irony of this position is that Feuerbach, by saying what God is not (a distinct and separate being), holds a version of negative theology.

argue that Divine activity, Divine being, because it is comprehensible by consciousness, cannot be essentially **different** from human consciousness.[57]

For Feuerbach then, consciousness, although infinite, is (metaphorically speaking), closed in the sense that it limits what is humanly conceivable. Outside consciousness, there is nothing. God as an ontologically distinct being is impossible. Feuerbach holds that ontological difference is precluded by the nature of human consciousness.[58]

By asserting that the symbolic is masculine and that it might be possible to construct a feminine symbolic, Irigaray challenges this 'closed' view of consciousness. She does not hesitate in positing a relationship between bodily experience and consciousness and its symbolic structures and contents. Sexed embodiment is primary in the constitution of sexed subjectivity and in the formation of consciousness.[59] Female embodiment is represented through a male symbolic which, in psychoanalytic terms, figures the female body as an atrophied male body (which lacks a penis in other words). Since the symbolic is masculine, a product of male experience and male understanding, consciousness cannot/does not stand outside this understanding. In this sense consciousness is itself 'masculine'. So Irigaray, in contesting the validity of the male symbolic for women and proposing the possibility of a feminine symbolic, disputes the notion of a sex neutral consciousness. But she also challenges the possibility of ontological difference.

Feuerbach works within a framework of a philosophy of the Same: all that there is, belongs to one symbolic, one consciousness. Irigaray posits a sexed difference with symbolic and ontological repercussions in which a potentially female-sexed subject informs a female-sexed consciousness.

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[57] ibid., p. 29.

[58] For a discussion of ontological difference see Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of Ontological difference", in Teresa Brennan (ed.), Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis (Routledge, London & New York, 1989).

[59] For a discussion of this point see Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism (Allen & Unwin, St. Leonard's, 1994).

I remarked earlier that according to Irigaray, creating a feminine and creating a feminine Divine must be the same undertaking. Feuerbach's mirror imagery is an important metaphor here. The mirror that women need in order to become women is not something which simply produces or projects an idealised image. The mirror itself, the means by which an image can be produced, is an issue for Irigaray.

> We look at ourselves in the mirror to *please someone*, rarely to interrogate the state of our body or our spirit, rarely for ourselves and in search of our own becoming. The mirror almost always serves to reduce us to a pure exteriority - of a particular kind. It functions as a possible way to constitute screens between the Other and myself. In a way quite different from the mucous membranes or the skin that serve as living, porous, fluid media to achieve communion as well as difference, the mirror is a frozen - and polemical - weapon to keep us apart. . . . The mirror and the gaze are frequently used as weapons or tools that ward off touching and hold back fluidity, even the liquid embrace of the gaze. . . . Although necessary at times as a separating tool, the mirror - and the gaze when it acts as a mirror - ought to remain a means and not an end that forces my obedience. The mirror should support, not undermine my incarnation. . .[60]

Within this context, we might read Irigaray's talk about the mirror which women need, as condemnatory of the contents - the gaze by which women are regulated as objects ("pure exteriority") - and as an appeal for the structure or form of the mirror to be reconstituted.[61] While she obviously sympathises with Feuerbach, Irigaray's project to construct a feminine Divine takes on a dimension which his (to reinterpret religion as an anthropological concern) does not have. She reads Feuerbach literally and argues that if God is the mirror of man, and God is masculine, then a feminine God should be the mirror of woman. Her reading of Feuerbach bears directly on what she holds is the gendered nature of the Divine and the creation of sexual difference. The mirror reflects, projects and represents embodiment and the body is sexed. Sexual difference already contains the idea of embodiment. But it must be seen and represented under the gaze of a woman. Hence women's need of a mirror will be need of a mirror that is sexed in terms of its ability to **re-present** and re-figure. A symbolic which is a **feminine** feminine

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60 op. cit., Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies, p. 65.

61 For a fuller discussion of the mirror trope see Irigaray's essay "Une mère de glace" in op. cit.,Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman, pp. 168 - 179.

symbolic and through which the mirror will alter its own gaze is what will engender feminine incarnation.

At the moment however, women are the Other, different from men, symbolically mutilated or lacking. But that Otherness and difference is constructed such that they are not ontologically different from men. Irigaray uses the difference of women as constructed by the masculine symbolic as a means to subvert the symbolic itself. Using the **masculine** feminine as her starting point, Irigaray manipulates the symbolic representation of women to examine the possibility of a feminine symbolic, a **feminine** feminine.

***Mimēsis:* the becoming of the feminine**

So far in this thesis, I have argued that using women's experience as a theological category is not as straight forward as it might seem. With the introduction of Irigaray's perspective, the argument takes a different turn. Since women's experience is situated within a masculine symbolic, the problematic of women's experience as a foundational category becomes even more perilous. The very possibility of there being a **feminine** feminine, hence a female symbolic in which women can become their own genre, (and be their own experience) appears to be precluded from consideration because of the totalising effect of the male symbolic. But put simply, it is all that women have got. Recall that I made this point in connection with Daly in chapter 2, when I argued that she is dependent upon the philosophical systems which she has inherited.

If the male symbolic is the totality of the symbolic within which women are defined in terms of lack, then women are granted no ontological independence. As the Other of the Same, women, represented negatively, are so atrophied that they have been rendered incapable of figuring their difference. Within the Lacanian scheme however, the masculine symbolic does not totally exhaust possible representation of the feminine. Lacan alleges:

> Her being not all in the phallic function does not mean that she is not in it at all. She is in it *not* not at all. She is right in it. But there is something more. . . . There is a *jouissance,* since we are dealing with *jouissance*, a

> *jouissance* of the body which is, if the expression be allowed, beyond the phallus . . . A *jouissance* beyond the phallus . . .[62]

Lacan had also argued that "woman knows nothing of this *jouissance*"[63] (and interestingly enough compared it with the mystical).[64] It is in this way that we might think of women's inability to represent herself symbolically.[65] While the male symbolic imposes limits on the feminine, it realises that its limitations are not exhaustive. In constituting and symbolising the feminine, the masculine does not quite take her all unto itself: the embodied feminine remains yet elusive. She is the unconsumed, the unexhausted, the Other which overflows. Symbolising the feminine as the two lips always touching, is Irigaray's rejoinder: female embodiment is symbolised as always too much, in the explicit, constant contact of the two lips.[66]

So Irigaray argues that "one sex is not entirely consumed by the Other. There is always a remainder."[67] The remainder is the excess of the Other of the Same. The rôle of *jouissance* or feminine excess which is beyond the Other of the Same, the **masculine** feminine, is critical to the discussion of difference. Irigaray defies Lacan and claims *jouissance* (feminine excess) for feminine consciousness. Her ploy is to challenge the assertion that women know nothing of *jouissance* and to acknowledge feminine excess. Since this must be an excess that is generated (but not contained) by the male symbolic - for the feminine is yet a **masculine** feminine - what can be said of *jouissance,* its acknowledgement (and ultimately its symbolisation) cannot be contained by the masculine

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62 Jacques Lacan, Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the *École Feudienne* (Juliet Mitchell & Jacqueline Rose, eds.) (trans. Jacqueline Rose) (Macmillan, London, 1982), p. 145.

63 ibid., p. 146.

64 ibid.

65 See Jane Gallop, Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1982).

66 op. cit., Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One.

67 Luce Irigaray, "Sexual Difference", in An Ethics of Sexual Difference (trans. Carolyn Burke & Gillian Gill) (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1993), p. 14.

symbolic.[68] The male symbolic cannot speak for what it cannot symbolise: *jouissance*. If that excess were to be symbolised within the masculine symbolic, it no longer would be *excess.* In other words, the logic of the masculine symbolic precludes the possibility of symbolising feminine excess, precludes the possibility of going beyond the phallus. But how does Irigaray claim *jouissance* for feminine consciousness?

In "The Power of Discourse", Luce Irigaray argued that women must work towards destroying discursive mechanisms, 'the *operation of the "grammar"* of each figure of discourse, its syntactic laws or requirements, its imaginary configurations, its metaphoric networks, and also of course, what it does not articulate at the level of utterance: *its silences*' [her italics].[69] Discursive mechanisms, the structures of discourse, are contained within the male symbolic. Since there is no alternative to the male symbolic, it might seem that it is not possible to construct anything quite different from it. No matter where women turn, they will always be faced by the symbolic which has bound them as women. Irigaray contests this assumption by thinking the possibility of women's discourse: *écriture féminine* "women's writing or sometimes 'writing the body'"[70] and in the complementary development of a possible female genealogy. One is reminded of Daly's language play: subverting the male paradigm in which women are defined by manipulating its own semiotics and semantics.

For Irigaray, feminine genealogy is one of the silences of the masculine symbolic which women must work to destroy[71]. She has suggested that one way in which women can begin to explore the possibility of women's own symbolic is "through subjective relations between mothers and daughters."[72] I take her here to be talking about

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68 In Luce Irigaray, Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution (trans. Karin Montin) (Routledge, New York, 1994).

69 op. cit., Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse", in This Sex Which Is Not One, p. 75.

70 op. cit., Whitford, Philosophy in the Feminine, p. 10.

71 For another account of genealogy see Kathy E. Ferguson, "Interpretation and Genealogy" in The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993), ch. 1.

72 Luce Irigaray, Je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference (trans. Alison Martin) (Routledge, London & New York, 1993), p. 47.

symbolising this relationship through the creating of a female genealogy and in terms of *écriture féminine*.

"The Forgotten Mystery of Female Ancestry", the text of a lecture which appears in thinking the difference, is Irigaray's exploration and condemnation of the banishment of female genealogy from our mythic cultures.[73] In that lecture Irigaray points out that both the mother/daughter relationship and the primal mother do not exist in Western cultural/mythic consciousness and/or they have been obliterated. For Irigaray this represents the destruction of female ancestry "especially in its Divine aspect".[74] She argues that women now exist through an undifferentiated masculine/neuter chaos. Dreams of unity cannot be realised whilst this chaos dominates, suggests Irigaray, because there can only be unity where there is difference.[75] This undifferentiated chaos is precisely where she situates what she calls our hom(m)osexual economy, the economy of the Same and her claims about the representation of the male subject.[76]

Throughout the lecture Irigaray is clear in her denunciation of the undifferentiated (the male symbolic), and equally, she is clear that feminine difference needs to be found outside the male symbolic in order for men and women to come together as lovers, "both carnal and spiritual." She cites Aphrodite as the embodiment of a deity "who manifests the possible spiritualization of blind drives or instincts through tenderness and affection . . . In Greek, Aphrodite's specific attribute is called *philotes*: tenderness" [her italics].[77]

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[73] op. cit., Irigaray, Thinking the Difference, pp. 91 - 113. This is also a theme which is dominant in op. cit., Feuerbach, "The Mystery of Mysticism", in Essence of Christianity, pp. 90 - 92.

[74] op. cit., Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, p. 100.

[75] I take Irigaray's comment, "We have become unisex in our drives . . . We are supposedly neither man nor woman because we are not yet men and women; we are still in the abyss of undifferentiated human being, the male pole of the most primeval Eros", op. cit., Irigaray, Thinking the Difference, p. 92, to be interpretable in the light of Galatians 3:28: "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave or free man, there can be neither male nor female - for you are all one in Christ Jesus",Galatians 3:28 in The New Jerusalem Bible (Doubleday, New York, 1985).

[76] op. cit., Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse", in This Sex Which Is Not One, p. 74.

[77] op. cit., Irigaray, Thinking the Difference, p. 94.

But Irigaray also argues for a kind of separatism that will remove women from the bartering/exchange arrangements within which women presently exist and are represented:

> All these codes are beyond the little girl. She may make a mistake but she does not decide to do so. She is caught up in the dealings, contractual or otherwise, between men, between men and male gods. According to their agreements, she should refuse everything from men and gods so that she will not be seduced through a mistake on her part. She should keep well away from mankind, men's contracts, men's relationships, until her virginity is no longer a subject of negotiations between men. She should remember that virginity signifies her relationship to her physical and moral integrity, and not the price of a deal between men. She should learn to keep herself to herself . . . [78]

For Irigaray then, female genealogy, the honouring of the mother/daughter relationship and the honouring of the mother *per se* are essential in the development of a feminine symbolic[79] but they also have what I shall call a redemptive potential, for through them, Irigaray believes, awareness of the importance of social justice and ecology can evolve.[80] Difference will emanate through the ungrounding of the male symbolic, as a female genealogy is created. Re-reading women's mythic traditions is integral to this process.[81] The re-reading, retrieval and refiguring of that tradition will be part of the process of making a feminine Divine.[82]

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[78] ibid., p. 108.

[79] Irigaray points out that Mary the mother of Jesus, does not appear to have a mother and that the Greek goddesses are all motherless as they emerge from primal chaos which is masculine/neutral. See ibid., Thinking the Difference. See also op. cit., "Divine Women" where Irigaray discusses the necessity of female genealogy to a feminine symbolic.

[80] op. cit., Irigaray, Thinking the Difference, p. 112.

[81] I see much of Irigaray's work in this context ranging from mythic through psychoanalytic and philosophical tradition. It is arguable that these traditions exist as part of the **masculine** feminine symbolic. The importance of *mimēsis*, of miming the **masculine** feminine comes into play here. So I see the acknowledgement of the feminine tradition here as integral to the overall project and to *mimēsis*.

[82] cf op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, and op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, whose views also propose re-reading and retrieving women's traditions of the Christian Church, but within what I read as quite an orthodox context in that she retains unquestioningly, elements of orthodox Christian thinking for example the importance and centrality of Jesus.

I remarked before that **masculine** feminine experience is all that women have got. The re-reading of women's mythic traditions, where they do exist, will be a re-reading of the traditions as they are symbolised by the male symbolic. Compare this with Daly's enterprise in the Wickedary where she emphasises women's mythic origins. In both cases, women's experience(s) (even if constituted by the masculine symbolic) underpins those traditions. Where they are not symbolised, the discursive mechanisms which prevent their articulation must be challenged and destroyed. Irigaray chooses *mimēsis* as the strategy which will enable their destruction and propose a feminine symbolic.

Irigaray contends that within the male symbolic, the rôle of mimicry has been historically assigned to the feminine. She argues that "one must assume the feminine rôle deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it."[83] Hence Irigaray recognises that women's position in relation to creating a feminine symbolic is not irrevocable and argues that what women must do is to exploit and to transform the feminine, by deliberately assuming what it says that women are.[84] In other words, Irigaray suggests that women should use the **masculine** feminine as a mimetic strategy to exploit their specification within phallocratic, male discourse.[85] How one is to understand her project here, however, is contentious.

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[83] op. cit., Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, p. 76.

[84] This is the context of the substantial controversy over whether or not Luce Irigaray is essentialist, which I mentioned earlier in relation to Schüssler Fiorenza. See for example op. cit., Toril Moi, "Patriarchal reflections" in Sexual /Textual Politics, pp. 127-147; op. cit., Plaza, '"Phallomorphic Power"; op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said; Diana Fuss '"Essentially Speaking": Luce Irigaray's Language of Essence' in Nancy Fraser & Sandra Lee Bartky (eds.) Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992).

[85] Judith Butler, in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (Routledge, London & New York, 1990), discusses parody as a political and social tactic which has the ability to displace identities which have no origin, which are in fact imitative. Butler argues this in relation to drag and comments, "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency*" [her italics], pp. 136 -37. The question which seems to arise here is whether or not Irigaray intends women to imitate gender (*viz.* sexual behaviour). Given that she is quite explicit in articulating women as sexed subjects, I do not think this is the case. The relation between the sexed subject and her female body is both fundamental and historically contingent. I think Irigaray wants women to take this very seriously. The point of her mimetic strategy seems then to be subversive and transformational to claim, create, identity rather than a strategy for deferring identity, which if I read Butler at all well is what she is speaking about.

To evoke her idea that women are without a gender, Irigaray has argued that they are in a state of dereliction.[86] That dereliction suffuses them not because women lose their identity within a patriarchal system but because they have never had any identity except within the system: all symbols, signs and so on are alien; they are not theirs. This is partially the sense in which women do not have essence, the point I made in discussing Aristotle. In their Otherness, defined by patriarchy, then, they have failed to realise any symbolic which articulates their specificity as sexed feminine subjects; failed that is, to constitute a feminine symbolic of their own. As we have seen, the implication is that women presently are **masculine** feminine subjects. That is to say, women as subjects, are produced through the operation of a masculine symbolic which dictates what it means to be both a subject and a feminine subject. In that sense, women are not subjects at all but objects within the masculine symbolic.[87]

By self-consciously miming the **masculine** feminine, Irigaray believes it might be possible to begin to fabricate a **feminine** feminine. A fundamental constituent of this process will be the establishment of a female genealogy, in which women will represent the (presently) unsymbolised mother/daughter relationship.

As a strategy, *mimēsis* - the self-conscious appropriation of the **masculine** feminine within the masculine symbolic - provides the means for moving into the fluidity, openness, fecundity and multiplicity of the feminine. It involves acknowledging one's dereliction - one's abandonment in the void of the unsymbolised.

The idea of *mimēsis* is alluring, in that *mimēsis* embraces, rather than rejects, the Otherness of woman, of the feminine. It does that by acknowledging feminine excess, *jouissance*, as an incorporative ingredient of potentially feminine being. In taking seriously the notion of the **masculine** feminine, in drawing out its implications, but nonetheless denying its eternal veracity, one can explore the risk proposed through strategically miming the feminine in all its masculine representations: Other, *jouissance* and the silences amongst which one will find genealogy.

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86 op. cit., Luce Irigaray, "An Ethics of Sexual Difference" in An Ethics of Sexual Difference, p. 126.

87 op. cit., Irigaray, This Sex Which is not One, *passim*.

But what does/will all of this mean in practical and theoretical terms? A number of issues come to mind:

1. Although Irigaray suggests that women should mime the **masculine** feminine she takes for granted that her connotations of "*mimēsis*" are understood. For what does she actually mean by *mimēsis*? Mere copying or parody or imitation? To what end?
2. If not mere copying, if deliberate mime for example, how is the mime, in the end, different from being/living the **masculine** feminine?
3. Who/what is doing the miming, as an actress acts? In other words, does being aware that one is miming *change* what one is doing? Would women not simply be playing a rôle as any actress plays a rôle? Is this not a kind of grand self-delusion?
4. What are the consequences, practical and theoretical, of engaging in the activity/pursuit of *mimēsis*? Would it mean that women would, in the end, establish their own symbolic structure with its own language significations and terms; develop a new value system in which an emerging genealogy based on the mother daughter relationship is prized; develop a new or deeper understanding of Divinity with the former as its symbolic constituents, as Irigaray implies it would?
5. Or would women be caught up in a world of pretense where there is nothing meaningful but the rôle women play and the context in which it arises: patriarchy?
6. Would it mean that women should no longer participate in the enduring political practices of patriarchy? How would the female symbolic relate to the male?
7. And what of moral and political questions? Would women selectively engage in *mimēsis*, make choices about what women would privilege in, and practice out, of the (masculine) feminine?
8. On what basis would such choices be made?

I have suggested that *mimēsis* is contentious, so in the light of these multifarious questions, how is one to respond to, and understand, Irigaray's project? Irigaray's

comment that women should "assume the feminine rôle" is ambiguous. She recommends either a project in which women mime the **masculine** feminine, **or** one in which women mime the excess, *jouissance,* the remainder to which I earlier referred, **or** even that women do both. Her writing suggests the former, *viz.* women mime the **masculine** feminine.

Yet in articulating woman in the rôle of Other (as has been the tradition), Irigaray surely cannot just be asserting that the Other is the **masculine** feminine. Given that she believes that there is only one sex, the feminine of the masculine seems to be not Other in terms of the *unknowable*, but Other in terms of *knowable*. It is knowable because the masculine actually defines the feminine, says what the feminine means. Hence the argument might go: the feminine is a construction by the masculine, that which says what one is as a woman, as feminine/female. But the consequence of this 'knowable that women are' is that since their terms are imprecise (fluid, ever changing, multiple, unpredictable), an excess, overflow, remainder, a further Other, is created.

'Other' thus becomes a two-pronged term, with a meaning generated from within the male symbolic (immanent? or 'inside Other') and a meaning which is outside that symbolic (transcendent? or 'outside Other'). So there are two senses in which, I think, one should understand the Other. The Other is both the known symbolised, the contents/structure of the male symbolic, including the **masculine** feminine; and the unsymbolised, what flows out of and cannot be captured by the male symbolic: the (unknown) **feminine** feminine (the nothing to which I referred earlier).

If this is the case, the two possible readings of Irigaray I have proposed seem to be mutually dependent: miming the **masculine** feminine and *jouissance* which **only** women can symbolise. The masculine symbolic gives clues for a possible feminine symbolic. In miming the **masculine** feminine, women would implicitly approach the Other of the unsymbolised by arrogating her characteristics. In other words, if women deliberately adopt the position and attributes of the feminine in the male symbolic, the position of the **masculine** feminine, women cannot but begin to mime the possibilities of a feminine symbolic.

The **masculine** feminine, understood as a fixed and knowable category, defined through the negation or contrariety of the masculine, embodies positive symbolic attribution: problematic, fluid, completely open, multiple and unpredictable. This Other, however, points beyond itself to the unsymbolised, the excess, the unknown Other of the feminine. The ambiguity of *mimēsis* allows it to be transformational/alternative in terms of symbolic structure and Utopian, or at least optimistic, in terms of hope for a better, integrated future for women.

Hence, that Irigaray does not explicitly say what *mimēsis* is, could indeed be thought of as part of the mimetic strategy itself: the **masculine** feminine **is** irrational, boundless and polymorphous.[88] Its expression involves articulating it within the terms of male defined femininity. But this expression, the strategic project of miming the **masculine** feminine, immediately engages the project of miming the position of the feminine: the feminine as Other within and without the masculine symbolic. Hence the feminine is both the known and the unknown.

Thought of in these terms, the problematic 'women's experience' develops a dimension which will acknowledge its constitution within the existing (masculine) symbolic structures, its situatedness. By acknowledging that there might be a feminine which is unsymbolised, its Otherness which is engendered by the male symbolic provides the impetus for a feminine symbolic, the place in which dereliction will be overcome.

But the questions I raised concerning *mimēsis* are cause for concern. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I attempt to respond to them.

The feminine symbolic and the *via negativa*

Earlier in this chapter I asserted that the context for the meaningfulness of Hebrew-based religious experience and belief is the male symbolic. I have suggested that women need to develop their own symbolic and that Irigaray's mimetic strategy, even with the questions and problems it poses, is pertinent to that enterprise. If women can develop

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[88] Compare this with the Pythagorean Table of Opposites which, you will remember, associates the feminine with infinity, plurality and motion.

their own symbolic, a revisioning of the Divine must have taken place.[89] Since all concepts and constructs are understood within the male symbolic, the Divine itself 'belongs' within that symbolic.

I would not want to argue that just because the meaning context for woman and the feminine is the male symbolic, then that is the only place in which it **could** be understood and is meaningful. It must be possible for women to move beyond the masculine place of understanding and meaning, if one is to accept that the masculine symbolic is **masculine** and therefore but one possible constructing and interpretational horizon. Because there presently *is* no alternative to the male symbolic, it does not follow that there *can be* no alternative. *Mimēsis*, for example, has the potential to open up a conceptual space which might provide new semantic contexts.

In miming the feminine women must, therefore, take up a new position in relation to the Divine. The mimetic strategy will entail that women take up the position of the Other as a deliberate project or choice, which is itself a repositioning. (One consciously takes up the feminine and its boundlessness, rather than unconsciously *being the feminine* as dictated by the male symbolic.) Once this repositioning occurs, women's relation to all that is within and potentially without the male symbolic must change, both in terms of place and content.

Within the male symbolic, the feminine, the known and characterisable, occupies a similar place to that of the Divine. In Western theologies, the Divine has been apprehended and appropriated through the *via positiva*, what one can say about God: that for example, God is all good, powerful, omnipresent, love.[90] In other words, God is symbolised positively or is capable of affirmative attribution of characteristics, the very point made by Feuerbach. Given what I have been arguing, what can be said is engendered by the masculine symbolic. But there is also a tradition of negative theology: the *via negativa* is the unsymbolised, the ineffable, what lies outside the male symbolic

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89 This is Irigaray's contention and intention in op. cit., "Divine Women" in Sexes and Genealogies, *passim*.

90 Recall that Schüssler Fiorenza notes that such language is analogical. See, chapter 3, p. 123, of this thesis.

and cannot be said. I referred to this distinction (between *via negativa* and *via positiva*) in chapter 3, in my discussion of Schüssler Fiorenza's conceptualisation of G*d.

The *via negativa*, like the feminine, is also Other within and to the male symbolic. Just as one can give two mutually dependent senses to 'Other' as it is used in relation to the feminine, so can one in relation to the Divine: the contrast between the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* is the contrast between the two senses of Other one can give to the feminine. The *via positiva* creates an overflow, a 'too muchness' which cannot be represented and therefore constitutes an unknowable Other which forces itself outside the male symbolic.

What women should mime in miming the feminine, is both the Other within the male symbolic and the Other, the excess, created through symbolising the **masculine** feminine. The excess, the unsymbolised feminine, brings them to inhabit the unknown, and presently unknowable, the very position in which one encounters the dark night of the soul, the *via negativa*.

Some of the characteristics (analogically) attributed to the male symbolic Divine, infinity for example, are characteristics analogously assigned to the feminine, within the male symbolic (unlimited, formless, boundless). The unsymbolised feminine and the unsymbolised Divine might then be thought of as co-inhabitants of the Other. So that by analogy, at least, in miming the feminine, women begin to mime the Other that is the Divine. Whether women mime the unlimited and boundless as feminine excess or encounter it as Divine excess, that it is unsymbolised and boundless, means that it must fail to admit of discrimination. The infinite, the unlimited are unbounded and therefore undifferentiated. *Mimēsis*, in other words, becomes a process of creating a feminine symbolic which potentially embodies a new understanding of, and clues to, the Divine. Hence *mimēsis* can be understood as a **transformative** strategy[91] which, in proposing a possible feminine symbolic, also proposes a possible reinterpretation, indeed, remaking of the Divine.

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[91] See Morny Joy, "Hermeneutics and *mimēsis*" in Studies in Religion, 19 (1) (Winter 1990), pp. 73 - 86, for a discussion of transformation and *mimēsis*.

Thus far I have argued that the symbolic is masculine, that the Divine projected as it is from the masculine symbolic is masculine, and that in *mimēsis* there is an avenue to the difference which Irigaray believes is possible in the constituting of a feminine symbolic, integral to which is female genealogy. I want now to explain how it might be possible to move beyond the masculine symbolic. While my exposition of the Other has been developed out of certain understandings of its place within the masculine symbolic, I have not yet explicated its relationship to difference as an ontological concern, a point I raised earlier in relation to Feuerbach. In the next section then, I offer a brief reading of difference, *mimēsis* and feminine ontological possibility.

The Other, Difference and *Mimēsis*

Earlier on, I argued that there are two senses in which one might understand the term 'Other' within and without the male symbolic ('inside Other' or the Lacanian Other and 'outside Other' the Lacanian impossible Other of the Other). I asserted that within the male symbolic, the feminine is constructed as Other, the not of the masculine. I also said that the construction of a **feminine** feminine will result in the making of a symbolic which is indeed outside the male symbolic, and hence an Other (the Other of the Other) (which one might associate with the *via negativa*). These two senses of Other share a common characteristic: they are Other because they represent difference. But how is one to articulate this difference?

In her book on Luce Irigaray, Philosophy in the Feminine, Margaret Whitford argues that in "Divine Women" the hypothesis Irigaray is proposing "is that the projection of a woman divinity could introduce sexual difference into the symbolic".[92] As I have been arguing, Irigaray alleges that there is only one symbolic, the masculine symbolic. Hence to speak of **the** symbolic is to speak of the **masculine** symbolic. My assertion is that Irigaray does not want to introduce sexual difference into the (masculine) symbolic at all, but that she wants to use the (masculine) symbolic to create a **feminine** symbolic, a symbolic **other than, different from** the masculine symbolic. In other words, there is no

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[92] op. cit., Margaret Whitford, Philosophy in the Feminine, p. 141.

neutral symbolic[93] which could be ruptured by the introduction of feminine difference. For Whitford to claim then, that the introduction of sexual difference into the symbolic is one of Irigaray's hypotheses, misses the point about 'a feminine Divine' and fails to articulate what I see as a peculiarity of Irigarayan difference.

But Whitford's contention is understandable given that a certain kind of feminine difference **already** exists within the symbolic. That difference arises out of what Irigaray refers to as the economy or the logic of the Same, the operation of a reductionist logic in which oneness is not only privileged, but appropriates the very possibility of difference.[94] I referred before to what Feuerbach called ontological difference, and that is what is of interest here. I argued that Irigaray parted from Feuerbach because she suggests that sexed difference is an ontological possibility. In other words, the creation of an alternative to the masculine symbolic, in this case a feminine symbolic, suggests a difference in being for women. On Irigaray's understanding, difference in being has its origins in the subversion and dissipation of the logic/economy of the Same.

In Irigaray's work, two related traditions in the polemic over difference converge: the psychoanalytic and the metaphysical. The psychoanalytic tradition emerges with Freud's discussion and hypothesising of feminine sexuality. In this context, difference is **sexual** difference and it involves interpretation of the castration complex, penis envy and the construction of feminine sexuality in terms of lack.[95] What I am calling the metaphysical tradition has its origins in the debate, about universals and the accommodation of difference under terms of identity.[96] There, the emphasis was on how to account for difference as part of an overarching metaphysic of the Same: the search for identity and unity. In the past hundred and fifty years, difference has been analysed

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93 And no neutral or ungendered subject.

94 op. cit., Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, p. 74.

95 See op. cit., Lacan, Feminine Sexuality.

96 For example, see "Heraclitus" in Jonathan Barnes (trans. & ed.) Early Greek Philosophy (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1987); See also, "Theaetetus", 179c - 186e, in Francis Macdonald Cornford (trans. & commentary) Plato's Theory of Knowledge (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, New York, 1935).

and interpreted (or its meaning assumed) by thinkers ranging from Feuerbach through Nietzsche, Heidegger and of course, Derrida.

Emerging from the two traditions comes a perspective which is Irigaray's attempt to refigure difference in light of the notion of **sexed** symbolic(s). Firstly, the sexual difference which originates in Freud's and Lacan's works depends upon a phallogocentric assessment of the rôle of the phallus in the development of feminine sexuality. In the second place, it is a **contained** difference, inside the masculine symbolic, a difference which does not allow of an Other of the Other. I have also been arguing that Irigaray's acknowledgement of feminine excess and multiplicity is central to the eventual undermining of the masculine symbolic and the possibility of an Other of the Other.

In The Adventure of Difference, Gianni Vattimo uses what I consider to be a particularly enlightening expression, 'ungrounding', in his discussion of the metaphysics of presence.[97] I am going to borrow this term from Vattimo and suggest that Irigaray's proposal that women should mime the feminine is a proposal for **ungrounding**: in other words, the devalorising of the masculine and the establishing of a feminine symbolic, problematises the uniqueness of the masculine symbolic as the sole horizon in which feminine experience could be understood. To unground is to subvert the assumptions of the metaphysics of the Same. That being the case, the possibility of opening a gap in, and getting outside, the masculine symbolic arises. What will follow from that is an acknowledgement of sexed difference, and the possibility of an alternative sexed (feminine) symbolic. If the male symbolic can be ungrounded, destabilised by the assertion of feminine difference, its hold on the feminine will crumble.

Ungrounding through *mimēsis* should, therefore, be thought of as an avenue to outside difference, the Other of the Other. But ungrounding itself depends upon the existence of what I have called inside difference, the Other of the masculine symbolic. So there is an explicit relationship between the Other - difference found in the masculine symbolic - and ungrounding. That relationship is parasitic, as ungrounding will eventually dissolve the power of the symbolic which has given it birth. Ungrounding, therefore,

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97 Gianni Vattimo, The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy after Nietzsche and Heidegger (trans. Cyprian Blamires & Thomas Harrison) (Polity Press, Cambridge UK, 1993), p. 4.

undermines inside difference by challenging the ontological assumptions implicit in the masculine symbolic.[98] The point is that there is a possibility of moving beyond the construction of the Other, by insisting that difference itself can be re-formed by acting from within the masculine symbolic (through *mimēsis*), to come to a creation and some articulatable understanding of the Other of the Other. There is a chance for ontological independence for the feminine through the construction of a feminine symbolic.

This does not mean that ungrounding enables women to stand outside history, or that the becoming of the feminine is ahistorical. Because the subject is already situated, she already carries with her a history, a culture in which she is embedded and embodied. But because she is situated, it does not follow that the subject cannot take a stance, subvert her situation, her embeddedness. Schüssler Fiorenza's claim that Irigaray is essentialist because she uses a universalising, ahistorical notion of the feminine and women which reinscribes and revalorises patriarchal distinctions, should be abandoned on these grounds alone.

Irigaray's thesis makes no claims about the essentialising origins of the term 'woman'. It simply assents to the temporal situatedness of the subject but then disclaims that the masculine symbolic is not logically, temporally or culturally binding. It allows for the possibility of a feminine symbolic ontologically independent of the masculine symbolic, which can engender and refigure the Divine as a feminine Divine.

The remaining questions about *mimēsis* which I raised above, have yet to be answered and so I now turn to them. The question "Why *mimēsis*?" has in part been answered through my insistence that it is a subversive strategy. As a subversive strategy *mimēsis* is employed first and foremost in Irigaray's writing style, her literary *genre*, and is a term which is deliberately ambiguous. It is the feminine *genre* (as constituted by the male symbolic): weaving magical pictures of possibility; poetry; apparent disorganisation; interpretation and connection; suggestion of the female body (the cave analogy) that infuses the whole of Irigaray's writing.[99]

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[98] I have in mind assumptions such as that the One should be privileged over the many, that the symbolic within which we work is neutral, that the feminine cannot be symbolised outside the symbolic because there is no other symbolic possible apart from that which we already inhabit.

[99] See "Plato's Hystera" in op. cit.,Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman.

To consider that Irigaray is herself a 'gendered subject' we can say that she is always the feminine, but that she also deliberately seeks to escape that identity. The appropriateness of using *mimēsis* seems obvious in this context. Effectively, Irigaray is saying to the world: 'You have called me woman; you have said thus and thus of the feminine which I embody. Here it is in literary text, in your psychoanalysis, in your philosophy'.

Secondly, and equally importantly, Irigaray displays a preference for the feminine, albeit the **masculine** feminine (there is no Other). Again, her texts are witness to this. In this way, Irigaray unbalances the privileging which is manifest in the a/not-a dichotomy,[100] the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, the construction of the feminine as lack, as not. This unbalancing is necessary as a foundational ingredient in ungrounding, the disruption and rupture of the masculine symbolic.

Thirdly, *mimēsis* is a transformative as well as a subversive strategy, as I submitted above. Morny Joy has argued that Paul Ricoeur has portrayed the transformative power of refiguring reality "as the prerogative of fiction".[101] She goes on to say that:

> In his latest works Ricoeur has introduced the term *mimēsis* as a refinement of his earlier ideas of re-figuration and implies that other varieties of narrative texts have this same potential to disturb the *status quo*.[102]

We might think of Irigaray's writings as those which either come under the heading of 'other narrative texts' (for example Marine Lover) or we might disclaim Irigaray as a writer of narrative texts at all, but one who nonetheless disturbs the *status quo*. In any case, it is precisely this disruptive use of *mimēsis* that Irigaray employs. Furthermore, she

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[100] Nancy Jay, "Gender and Dichotomy", in Sneja Gunew (ed.), A Reader in Feminist Knowledge (Routledge, London & New York, 1991), pp. 89 - 106.

[101] op. cit., Joy, "Hermeneutics and *mimēsis*", p. 76.

[102] ibid.

is urging that we move beyond the text, so to speak, and that we practice *mimēsis* in political, cultural, religious contexts.[103]

Lastly, there are questions which concern the instrumentality of *mimēsis*. I asked which aspects of the **masculine** feminine are we to mimic? All? Some? How are we to choose, to decide? In opting for a female genealogy, in recovering women's mythic inheritance, Irigaray suggests that *philotes* (tenderness) is a specific quality of Aphrodite's which should be appropriated. That, together with wonder, seems to be the yardstick by which we ought to embrace the **masculine** feminine in order to transform it. Tenderness bridges the gap between *agape* and *eros*. This, as I see it, is the sign of the sensible transcendent, the integration of the immanent and the transcendent:[104]

> It therefore is not a matter of agape without eros, but the two combined in a love that is both carnal and spiritual.[105]

Therefore, whatever promotes tenderness, the moral disposition to care and wonder, is what should be preferred from the **masculine** feminine. In other words, the promotion of tenderness, in order to realise the sensible transcendent, is, if you like, the 'moral' guide for feminist praxis. Hence *mimēsis* is not a vacuous and mindless process of mere copying. It is a self conscious choice towards the ideal of **becoming** the feminine, of sexual difference, of manifesting the Divine feminine and of creating a feminine sexed subject. The point is that there is a direct relation between *mimēsis* and the projection of a female divinity. What is projected is an ideal, and this is why a feminine Divine is the condition for the development of a feminine symbolic. Miming the ideal projection is derived from both the male symbolic and *jouissance*.

Here I should like to say something more about the relation of women to the *via negativa*. In becoming, women enter into the mystery of the Divine, the *via negativa*, the

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[103] See, for example, Irigaray's suggestion that practical steps (such as having pictures of mothers and daughters prominently displayed) should be taken. See, Irigaray in op. cit., Thinking the Difference; op. cit., Je, tu, nous; and Elemental Passions (trans. Joanne Collie & Judith Still) (Routledge New York, 1992).

[104] For an excellent discussion of the sensible transcendent see op. cit., Deutscher,'"The Only diabolic thing about women . . .", and op. cit., Whitford, Philosophy in the Feminine, pp. 47 - 49.

[105] op. cit., Irigaray, Thinking the Difference, p. 94.

darkness which they have inherited as the Other of the male symbolic. Their existence in that place of unknowing, will not provide epistemological certainties any more than does their existence in the male symbolic. For the feminine symbolic will also have an Other: the masculine symbolic. In their meeting place, in the love made possible by the construction of the female symbolic, will be a space which remains unknown and where the *via negativa* persists. Women may find the Divine in all of these spaces.

The success of Irigaray's mimetic strategy depends upon accepting that the symbolic is masculine and that women actually do need a feminine symbolic of their own. But which women, one might ask? All women? If 'all women', how is one to characterise the class of all women and its members? Is there anything which can be said of all women? If so, has not one fallen into the essentialist trap of positing universal ahistorical essence which defines women? Even with the mimetic strategy, it might be argued, Irigaray does not go beyond the bondage of women within the masculine symbolic. On one reading - and this is so in Schüssler Fiorenza's case - *mimēsis* would simply revalorise and reinscribe the feminine and traditional conceptions of woman. But this is to miss the point of the subversive nature of *mimēsis* and its appeal to multiplicity and difference which diffuses universality and sameness. I suggested earlier in this chapter that Irigaray views the Divine as the site of resolution of opposites. I also argued that the sensible transcendent is a manifestation of the Divine. Now I want to argue that the notion of the sensible transcendent is particularly useful for elaborating the relationship between discourse and the body.

Recall that throughout this thesis I have been examining the tension between nominal and real essence and the way in which the body is implicated in this tension. I argued that Daly operates across this apparent binary opposition but that for her, language is inextricably tied to ontology such that language and ontology become one. This ontological-linguistic strategy of hers overlies an implicit acceptance of the body which is never critically evaluated. On the other hand, Schüssler Fiorenza rejects talk of the body as natural but has little to say about the processes which might be involved in its social construction, although her stand is patently social constructionist.

Both Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza privilege language. That is to say, each sees language in practice (discourse) as a primary producer of reality. Their differences could

be summed up by saying that whereas Daly believes discourse is **a** producer of reality, Schüssler Fiorenza is ambivalent about the degree to which discourse can be thought of as **the only** producer of reality. So for Daly, there is something independent of language, and for Schüssler Fiorenza that which we take to be natural is in language, is discursively produced. Schüssler Fiorenza's thesis that we can have more or less adequate access to reality and that G*d is independent of language problematises the degree to which she is committed to her thesis that discourse produces our major classes and categories. But for both Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza, women's experience is caught up in discursive practice. This being the case, women's experience as a foundation for feminist theologies captures in some way, the Divine.

In the work of Schüssler Fiorenza, I have argued, the Divine, G*d, remains independent of language while simultaneously being the projection of the community of believers, the ekklesia. It is plausible then, that G*d is an idealised projection of a perfectly working democracy, the discipleship of equals. It is worth noting that this rendering of Schüssler Fiorenza's work bears strong resemblance to Feuerbach's theological anthropology, as I earlier detailed it. Along side this though, the concept of a transcendent G*d also operates.

In chapter 2, I read Daly's onto-linguistic strategy as having many characteristics of Schüssler Fiorenza's constructionism. Daly's onto-linguistics construct women's experience and again, there is nothing stable, unchanging and timeless. For Daly, as for Schüssler Fiorenza, process and progress towards the Divine are critical. So on one level, the similarity of discursive positions is apparent. I have maintained that Daly's implicit acceptance of the female body as the ground for her onto-linguistics suggests that her position could be described as real essentialist with respect to the body. In this sense, Daly is dualist not because she seems to operate within two domains (the corporeal and the linguistic) but because language is always privileged in her discussions, over an unproblematic natural embodiment.

Irigaray, it could be argued, has much in common with both Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza. Certainly, the rôle of discourse is enormously important, and both Daly and Irigaray share the insight that discourse is sexed/gendered. Schüssler Fiorenza believes that this is not the case, that discourse is sex/gender neutral. In an endnote she remarks:

> Marjorie Proctor-Smith has pointed out that some feminists might consider my mode of critical discussion "male." It should by now be clear that I do not believe that there are "male" and "female" modes of research or "masculine" and "feminine" methods. However, in order to prevent such a misunderstanding, I would like to insist again that I am interested not in devaluation, but in a further development of feminist hermeneutics. Feminist theology needs critical clarification and discussion in order to come into its own.[106]

One wonders if Schüssler Fiorenza thinks the same of class and race: that her mode of critical discussion does not bear the hallmarks of race and class. One wonders why discourse, represented here by 'critical discussion', 'research' and 'methods' should escape the sex/gender, class and race constructionist overtones that exist elsewhere within the kyriarchal pyramid. It is worth noting that she may believe that discourse is neutral with respect to all of these factors. One should be surprised at this when she maintains that sex/gender, class, and race are all discursively produced through socio-political practice. So herein lies a major disagreement between Daly and Irigaray on the one hand, and Schüssler Fiorenza on the other.

Yet it is difficult to judge Irigaray's place in the nominalist/realist debate, for on my reading, she neither privileges language nor apparently excludes what Schüssler Fiorenza calls naturalism. Her use of the category, the sensible transcendent, appears to me to place her firmly in both camps: that of realism and that of nominalism. Hence for Irigaray, it is arguable that de Lauretis' assertion about real and nominal essence finds, as it did with Daly, a possible interpretation which respects the possibility of both, true to Locke's metaphor. But Irigaray's concept of the sensible transcendent disclaims the dualism of the conjunction, for she privileges neither the constructed nor the essential. In my final chapter I will elucidate this position using some recent work of American philosopher, Sally Haslanger, as the springboard for the discussion.

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[106] op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, "Towards a Critical Feminist Hermeneutics", in In Memory of Her, endnote 65, p. 39.

CHAPTER 5

ESSENTIALISM, SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM, AND THE DIVINE

The Ambiguity of Social Constructionism

Throughout this thesis, I have discussed the meaning and questioned the implications of essentialism. I have argued that feminist theologians reject essentialist accounts of 'woman' and 'woman's experience' because such accounts attribute to women a timeless, ahistorical and unchanging essence. Critics of essentialism argue that real essence is actually constructed through discursive practice and therefore does not reflect anything independently 'real'. According to them, essentialist conceptions cannot and do not take account of the substantial differences amongst women. Schüssler Fiorenza argued, following Spelman, that 'woman' is not simply a sex/gender term but also socio-political, and that feminist essentialist theory, in positing sex/gender as the primary analytic category, ignores complex cultural factors in how the terms 'woman'/'women' are conceptualised. This is a serious omission because feminist theory in general has taken the case of privileged white women to be representative of all women.

I have also argued that female embodiment has been ignored by feminist theologians such as Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza.[1] In part this is because the question of embodiment has been perceived to be part of the problem of essentialism. Given that there might be something essential about women, that women might have real essence, then the unquestioned assumption is that certain normative or prescriptive implications will follow from whatever it is that is essential, the body for example. Hence it is taken to be the case that the proposition that women are natural child bearers, implies the proposition that women are natural carers. Rather than denying this implication, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has denied that there is anything essential, in terms of Locke's real essence, in the first place. I have argued that Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza use social

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[1] Although, as I have also noted, the question of embodiment *per se* has of course been relevant to Christian Incarnation doctrines and the question of the corporeality of the Divine. See above chapter 4, footnote 8.

constructionism as a way of resolving the difficulties surrounding essentialism conceived of in this way.

To reiterate, I suggested that in line with traditional interpretations and critiques of essence like Aristotle's and Locke's, one could think about the question of essentialism as a dispute about the claim that there is something timeless, universal and unchanging (language dependent or independent of language) which makes a woman a woman. The claim of social constructionists like Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza is that women are socially constructed through complicated socio-political discursive practices. I also argued that claims about essentialism and social constructionism can be roughly mapped onto claims about real essence and nominal essence: either that there is some 'reality'[2] independent of language (real essence) or that 'reality' is constructed through various discursive practices (possibly nominal essence).

The view that language somehow 'opposes' essence, that essence should be thought of as a 'reality' independent of language, needs to be reviewed, as does what might be meant by 'social constructionism'. Recall again that Elizabeth Grosz asserts that the opposition between social constructionism and essentialism is false.[3] She argues that ultimately social constructionism must depend upon essentialism because the materials of constructionism "cannot themselves be constructed without the assumption of an infinite regress".[4] On this view, social constructionism needs to declare what its raw materials are. If this were to happen, then the relation between social construction and essentialism would prove not to be oppositional as is assumed. As I read Grosz, she is arguing that social constructionism must depend upon something other than language, the primary 'tool' of its elaboration. But the central question here is how the argument is to be set up and understood. If, for example, one refuses terms which separate the body and discourse, and one refuses terms which accept and valorise the binary opposition of embodiment and discourse, then quite a different conceptual model might emerge. In

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2 Throughout my discussion I indicate that the term 'reality' is contested either by speaking of 'the idea of reality' (or similar construction) or using single inverted commas, 'reality'.

3 See above, chapter 3.

4 Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism (Allen & Unwin, St. Leonard's, 1994), p. 213, endnote 20.

part, constituting another model is just what Schüssler Fiorenza attempts to do. How one conceptualises social constructionism is critical, then.

What Grosz points out is extremely important because both Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza concentrate on the construction of sex/gender through language practice. Most definitely, Daly's work exemplifies Grosz's diagnosis of constructionism. Schüssler Fiorenza, on the other hand, attempts to argue - unsuccessfully - for a view of constructionism which does not pre-suppose an independently real body. I argued in chapter 3, that on one level Schüssler Fiorenza appears to maintain that everything is in language, but that she fails to apply this theory consistently. For her, women's experience(s) is constructed through socio-political discourses. Discursive construction constitutes women in multiple terms of a sex/gender, class, and racial background. Women's experience is to be explained in the context of socio-political structures of oppression, particularly the kyriarchal pyramid, and not to be seen as an explanation. However, Schüssler Fiorenza uses social constructionist theory unproblematically, in terms of both taking a critical distance and elaborating it. 'Social constructionism' seems to mean for Schüssler Fiorenza, that somehow we 'make' the systems, objects/things and categories, which constitute our worlds.

I also cited Grosz's argument that many constructionists articulate constructionism in binary terms which reiterate the nature/nurture, sex/gender dichotomies. For Grosz, constructionism depends upon essentialism because the body remains the raw material of constructionism. In other words, the idea of the body remains intact, while language practices, which interpret and represent, are called into question.

The American philosopher Sally Haslanger has developed a taxonomy for thinking about social constructionism specifically in relation to feminist theory. Haslanger's work posits some useful ways of understanding social constructionism which elaborate the formulations I have been using so far.

Haslanger acknowledges the complexity of social constructionism in relation to 'reality'. She explores the ontological and epistemic commitments one might be required to make should one decide in favour of positing a 'reality' independent of language. Her conclusion, that although it might be the case that "our point of view on the world is always socially conditioned; . . . there is no reason to believe that the world we have a

point of view on is likewise socially conditioned",[5] is contentious.[6] There is no reason to suppose that there is a genuine distinction between 'the world' and 'the world we have a point of view on'. For example, what would it mean to speak of 'women' and 'women we have a point of view on' or the 'Divine' and 'the Divine we have a point of view on'? In my view to speak of 'women' and 'women we have a point of view on' is immediately to invoke a distinction which assumes the conceptual separability of the 'two'.[7] I shall have more to say about this shortly.

Within the context of deliberating about models of justice, knowledge and reality and their relation to social constructionism, Haslanger notes that '(o)n occasion it is possible to find the claim that "everything" is socially constructed or socially constructed "all the way down"'.[8] Haslanger does not elaborate the meaning of this expression, but suggests 'It is a short step to the conclusion that there is no reality independent of our practices or of our language, and that "truth" and "reality" are only fictions employed by the dominant to mask their power'.[9] This is the position taken by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, as I noted in chapter 3. But it should be reiterated that although the meaning of the phrase constructed "all the way down" is vague, what is **not** meant by either

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5 Sally Haslanger, "Ontology and Social Construction" (unpublished manuscript), p. 34. Forthcoming in Philosophical Topics, 23 (2) (Fall 1995). (Still unpublished at May 1996).

6 Compare this with the idea of making the leap from 'one cannot give a theory independent description of things' to 'there are no theory independent objects' to which I alluded in chapter 3.

7 Haslanger seeks to explore the distinction between the epistemological and the ontological, examining the claim "that because *knowledge* is socially constructed, there is no objective (and so no independent) reality". op. cit., Haslanger, "Ontology and Social Construction", p. 3. I have not been concerned with the epistemological questions related to articulating the idea of reality: woman, the Divine and so on in this thesis. But her concern is related to my claim above that it may not be possible to distinguish between our point of view of the Divine/woman and the Divine/woman. Some might argue as Haslanger suggests later on in this article, that epistemology and ontology are related and of course they are. But this is a peripheral issue for me.

8 op. cit., Haslanger, "Ontology and Social Construction", p.1. This is a phrase Haslanger borrows from Nancy Fraser. See Nancy Fraser, Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory (Polity Press, Cambridge UK, 1989), p.19 and p.60, where Fraser is discussing the idea of the body in Foucault's work).

9 op. cit.., Haslanger, "Ontology and Social Construction", p. 2.

Foucault, to whom Fraser attributes the phrase, or Schüssler Fiorenza, is that there is only language because neither of these theorists is a linguistic idealist.[10]

Haslanger's mention of "a reality independent of our practices" is worth attending to here. When, as I argued in chapter 3, Schüssler Fiorenza implicitly rejects the idea of reality, thought of as the 'facts of the matter' or that to which language refers, she means a 'reality' independent of our language practices. She believes that when one speaks of the natural, then one means this idea of 'reality' independent of language. According to her, discursive practices do not reflect or mirror 'reality' and there is no reality independent of our practices. Implicit in this is Schüssler Fiorenza's rejection of the 'natural' conceived of in this way. She holds that the 'natural' is discursively constructed. Recall also that Schüssler Fiorenza's work argues that 'truth' and 'reality' are fictions which mask the power of the dominant: white privilege, and Euro-centrism fit this viewpoint. But throughout her discussion, Schüssler Fiorenza does not make the meaning of social construction clear.

Haslanger, however, suggests several ways of interpreting 'socially constructed' and its cognates. These interpretations are both relevant to, and helpful for, understanding the essentialist debate. On biologistic readings of essentialism for example (which Schüssler Fiorenza denies in her secondary sex characteristics discussion), the concept of objective and independent 'reality' looms large. Such readings would hold that biology is prescriptive. Biology stands outside time, history and culture and while it may be interpreted, it remains independent of its interpretation. A direct link is, however, posited between biology and its interpretation. That link takes the form of an inference: given **this** biology, then certain prescriptive rules follow. The claim that all women are nurturers because all women have two x chromosomes, exemplifies prescriptive inference which is not questioned. Haslanger's investigation of social constructionism therefore has implications for essentialist understandings.

Generic social construction, Haslanger proposes, involves thinking of something in terms of being an "intended or unintended product of a social practice".[11] Professors

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[10] See Michel Foucault, "The Body of the Condemned" and "Docile Bodies" in The Foucault Reader (ed. Paul Rabinow) (Penguin Books, London, 1991).

[11] op. cit., Haslanger, "Ontology and Social Construction", p. 3.

and wives are generically constructed because in order to be a professor or a wife one must include the social properties and relations which render one eligible for being a professor or a wife . Social practices produce institutions such as marriage which provide the social conditions for being a wife.

Haslanger further differentiates generic construction into causal construction and constitutive construction. The former suggests that "something (an object, kind of object or property, or concept) is causally constructed iff social factors play a causal role in bringing it into existence"[12] and the latter suggests "something (an object, kind of object, property, or concept) is constitutively constructed iff in defining it we must make reference to social factors".[13] Her examples of these two different kinds of construction is gender. Sometimes one might think of the social construction of gender as a product of social causes. On other occasions one might think of gender as constitutive when for example one talks of gender as a system of categorising. In that case "gender should be understood as a social category whose definition makes reference to a broad network of social relations . . . gender is introduced as an analytic tool to explain a range of social phenomena".[14]

When one categorises or classifies, notes Haslanger, one uses language to make attributions which have "the power to both establish and reinforce groupings which may eventually come to "fit" the classifications".[15] Then she identifies 'discursive construction', a kind of causal construction, and says that "something is discursively constructed just in case it is the way it is, at least in part, because of what is attributed (and/or self-attributed) to it".[16]

Having made these distinctions in relation to things, Haslanger also proposes that the classificatory schemes one uses - how one classifies those things - are themselves socially constructed. It is within this context that it is possible to think of discursive

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[12] ibid., p. 5.

[13] ibid.

[14] ibid., p. 4.

[15] ibid., p. 5.

[16] ibid.

construction in the first place. One's classificatory schemes are "determined not by the "intrinsic" or "objective" features of the scheme to which (they are) applied, but by social factors".[17] This being the case, Haslanger argues that one should further distinguish pragmatic construction, weakly and strongly. Pragmatic construction is the notion that "a classificatory apparatus (be it a full blown classification scheme, or just a conceptual distinction or a descriptive term) is socially constructed just in case its use is determined, at least in part, by social factors".[18] Weakly pragmatic constructed distinctions are those in which social factors partially determine use of the distinction; strongly pragmatic distinctions are those in which social factors fully determine use of the distinction and the distinction 'fails to represent accurately any "fact of the matter"'.[19] Why Haslanger chooses to describe her distinction as 'pragmatic' is left unsaid. Presumably her use has something to do with the rôle social factors play, in part, in socially constructing classificatory apparatus "as much due to contingent historical and cultural factors as anything else".[20] But this does not tell us very much since social factors play some rôle in all constructionist positions. What historical and social factors are not contingent?

Note the similarities between Haslanger's strong pragmatic constructionism analysis of classificatory schemes, conceptual distinctions and descriptive terms[21] and Locke's position on nominal essences and general terms. Recall that Locke's analysis of nominal essence argued that general terms are that which give 'things' their essence. For him nominal essences are abstract ideas which we use to classify substances into general categories. When I maintained at the beginning of this thesis that there is a connection between Locke's nominal essence and social constructionism, this is exactly the kind of influence I envisaged. Haslanger's paper is, I think, an excellent example of this.

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17 ibid., p. 6.

18 ibid., p. 7.

19 ibid.

20 ibid.

21 By "descriptive term", I take Haslanger to mean terms which denominate and also those which describe. Hence "woman" can be thought of as either a descriptive term (I am a woman) or denominative (The woman over there is the one).

The models of constructionism which emerge in Haslanger's analysis, elucidate the ideas that language constitutes 'reality' (strong pragmatic constructionism) and that the world is separable from language (weak pragmatic constructionism). In the case of strong pragmatic constructionism, gender, for instance, might be thought of as that which is constituted completely through the discursive socio-political practices of a society. There is nothing 'real' about gender apart from discourse, language in practice. Language produces gendered positions which people learn and play out or perform. On the other hand, weak pragmatic constructionists might argue that although discourse plays an important rôle in the production of gender, there is something quite separate from language, independently 'real', sexed bodies for example, upon which language depends; a 'reality' apart from language. This is Grosz's description of social construction in which the sex/gender distinction is reproduced. Together, language and what is separable from it, produce 'reality'. In fact, there are two concepts of reality operating in the weak pragmatic stance: one which says there is 'reality' independent of language and one which indicates that 'reality' is a product of language conjoined with that which is independent of language. On this reading, the Divine for example, would be not just the product of socio-political discursive practice, but a reflection of an independent 'reality', whose existence is not dependent upon language but which, together with language, produces the 'reality' of the Divine. Schüssler Fiorenza's idea of G*d, I would argue, falls under this umbrella.

Moira Gatens, as well as Elizabeth Grosz, has remarked that one should be careful of reproducing in the sex/gender distinction, the dualistic idea of nature/nurture.[22] In other words, we should not think of sex and nature as a given on the one hand; and gender and nurture as socially constructed, on the other. Haslanger's distinction between these two ways of construing social constructionism is very important in this context. It is arguable that weak pragmatic constructionism might reproduce just this dichotomy.

But critical to Haslanger's account is the idea that there might be some 'reality' which is 'independent of language'. This raises the question of how one is to spell out the relationship of independence between language and the concept of reality. What would

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[22] Moira Gatens, "A Critique of the Sex Gender Distinction" in Sneja Gunew (ed.) A Reader in Feminist Knowledge (Routledge, London & New York, 1991), *passim*.

it mean for feminist theologies to say that there is a 'reality' independent of language in terms of the concept of woman and the concept of the Divine? Would the assumption of a reality independent of language inevitably lead to essentialist positions which feminist theologians have fought to reject? These are substantial issues with which I will be concerned in the rest of this chapter. The point is that raising and solving these kinds of issues in secular feminist theory has repercussions for religious feminist theory. Their resolution will have a major impact on the question of women's experiences and theorising women's relation to the Divine because, as I have been arguing, the questions are the same for both 'kinds' of theorising, religious and secular.

A consequence of consistently linking secular and religious feminist theories, of claiming the work of secular theorists for religious theorists (and perhaps vice-versa as in the case of Mary Daly), is that the boundaries between the two might become blurred. In my Introduction, I noted that feminist theologian Carol Christ had argued for a dissolution of dualism in feminist theology. She maintained that "women's quest seeks a wholeness that unites the dualisms of spirit and body, rational and irrational . . . "[23] If it is possible to refigure concepts like language and reality, essentialism and social-constructionism, without implicitly assuming dualism in their relation, then the idea that language and reality are separable, take on quite a different meaning. For example, if the relationship between language (the symbolic) and reality (the material) could be elaborated in a non-dualistic manner, then it is arguable that there would be no schism between woman and the Divine in Irigaray's refiguring of the Divine. A case in point is commentator Penelope Deutscher's argument that Irigaray's position is one that proposes a model for a non-schismatic analysis of women and the Divine.[24] I read into this argument that the idea that language and 'reality' are ontologically separable - that language and 'reality' belong to two different and separate realms - needs to be challenged at the outset because it is a model which is theoretically flawed.

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[23] See Carol P. Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest, (Beacon Press, Boston, 1980), p. 8.

[24] Penelope Deutscher, "'The Only Diabolical Thing About Women . . .": Luce Irigaray on Divinity', in Hypatia, Special Issue: "Feminist Philosophy of Religion" [Nancy Frankenberry & Marilyn Thie (eds.)] 9 (4) (Fall 1994), pp. 88 - 111.

On my reading, Haslanger's discussion fails to avoid the implications of ontological separability and is therefore dualistic. It will be recalled that Daly also seems to work within a dualistic framework which implies the existence of an independently real body. In terms of Haslanger's critique Daly would emerge as weakly pragmatic: social factors largely determine the use of categories and descriptors like 'woman', but the underlying 'reality' of the body already partly determines the attribution of the terms. The idea of the female body in other words, is a condition for attributing women's characteristics like biophilia and lust.

As I have been reading Schüssler Fiorenza, it would seem that her use of classificatory terms is strongly pragmatic. For her, reality is fully constituted by discursive practices. As I noted, she certainly argues that social factors completely determine use of gender, class and race terms, just as she denies that there are any facts of the matter like secondary sexual characteristics which 'match' the attribution of such terms. Yet she also retains notions of 'reality' (G*d and that to which one has more or less adequate access through language). This suggests she is a weak pragmatist. Haslanger implies that one can move between these positions, depending on what one is speaking about: individuals, universals, operative concepts, distinctions.[25] But Schüssler Fiorenza's declared intention to de-naturalise sex/gender and her implication that ideas of reality are a product of discursive practices, problematise and appeal to 'reality' independent of language, thus to weak pragmatic constructionism. Her argument that biology, for example, is already in language, is obvious. The removal of G*d from such a theoretical model is understandable given her theological context, but inconsistent given her metaphysical disposition.

Haslanger also argues that the construction of gender is discursive (and therefore causal) as well as strongly pragmatic. Given her ontological commitments, Schüssler Fiorenza, no doubt, would agree with her. Undoubtedly she would also agree with Haslanger that "*strongly pragmatic constructions are, in an important sense - illusions projected onto the world; their use might nevertheless track - without accurately*

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[25] op. cit., Haslanger, "Ontology and Social Construction", p. 12.

representing - a genuine distinction" [her italics].[26] Since Schüssler Fiorenza argues that language does not function to reflect any 'reality', that 'reality' is produced through socio-political discursive practices: there are no genuine distinctions in the world which language represents or reflects. The point is not that we never make genuine distinctions. We do, but they reflect our social arrangements and our socio-political biases and not some underlying, independent, 'reality'.

An interesting repercussion of Haslanger's analysis of social constructionism and her positing weak pragmatic constructionism is that it proposes the opposition of (real) essentialism and (nominal essentialist) social constructionism. Recall that de Lauretis followed Locke in setting up real and nominal essence as (apparently) oppositional. My reading of Haslanger suggests that there is room in her weak pragmatism for the idea that real and nominal essence can operate as parallel ontologies. But the question remains: how is one to explicate the relation between language and reality, between real and nominal essence?

Haslanger pursues the notion of objective reality, arguing that it might be possible to retain 'it', elaborated not in terms of what is objectively knowable, a strategy adopted by some theorists, but using instead "socially loaded criteria"[27] which "correspond to a distinction in how things are related to us . . . some relevant social factor, e.g. our finding them useful, or perhaps, politically expedient'.[28] She maintains the vacuity of the idea of the objectively real, analysed in terms of the objectively known, by arguing that "the whole point of speaking of an *independent* reality is to emphasize that there is no necessary connection between what's real and what human beings know or can (in practice) know" [her italics].[29] Efforts to elaborate the independently 'real' in terms of objective knowledge in other words, overlook that there are no requirements for reality to be tied to knowledge at all. 'Reality' may well exist even if there were no knowledge of that 'reality'. Haslanger argues:

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[26] ibid., p. 8.

[27] ibid., p. 31.

[28] ibid., p. 29.

[29] ibid., p. 31.

> I see no good reason in the arguments we've considered so far to collapse the epistemology-ontology distinction. When I say that something is real, my assertion is true just in case the thing in question exists; this is so even if the criteria I employ in making the judgement are socially loaded, and even if my utterance also expresses the value it has in my conception of things.[30]

Apart from Haslanger's denying that epistemic considerations should be relevant in deciding how to characterise independent reality, the latter remains a dilemma for her. Wanting neither an objectivist (and limiting) account of 'reality' nor perspectivist or social constructionist accounts, she maintains that "the task before us is to construct alternative, modestly realist, ontologies that enable us to come to more adequate and just visions of what is, what might be, and what should be".[31] Where should one go from here?

This lengthy excursion into Haslanger's paper highlights de Lauretis' folly in rejecting real essence. To reiterate, de Lauretis rejects the proposition that feminists might be talking about real essence when they talk about essence: they are actually talking about nominal essence. One might think 'that women are made' as a claim about social practice and language and 'that there is something essential about women' as a claim about real essence. Recall also that de Lauretis used Locke's distinction between real and nominal essence to help her sort out the essentialist problem. Suppose that one were to admit weak pragmatic constructionism to one's conceptual scheme. What happens then to de Lauretis' claim that feminists cannot really mean real essence when they talk about essence? On a weak pragmatic analysis of constructionism, it is obviously false. As Grosz has argued the point, for many feminists who speak about social construction, this weak pragmatism is precisely that about which they are talking. Bodies and language are ontologically separable. How do they relate to each other on such an account?

In order to sort out this relation, I will persist momentarily with Haslanger's distinction between weak and strong pragmatic construction, and as an initial move, I will introduce a distinction between what I shall call the descriptive and the normative. Let us assume the sex/gender (nature/nurture) distinction. Let us also assume an utterance

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30 ibid., p. 33.

31 ibid., p. 34.

such as 'Australian women are of the female sex because they have two x chromosomes' (although trivially true) is minimally descriptive and different from the utterance 'Australian women are of the female gender' which one could think of as normative, or saying something about social practice. Here we are confronted by two utterances which seemingly contain 'facts' about Australian women. But the second 'fact' is conditioned by social practice whereas the first is not: Australian women would be of the female sex even if there were no social practices which say that women are of the female gender. On Haslanger's account, the first is a weak pragmatic classification and the second, strongly pragmatic. Thus the second 'fact' is true in virtue of social practices; the first 'fact' is true in virtue of certain biological characteristics which are not determined by social practice. In this sense, there is a 'reality' which is independent of discourse: women all over the world are of the female sex. That they are of the female gender is determined by social practice (that is to say, it is causally and discursively constructed).

Given this distinction between the descriptive and the normative, it does not follow that there is a necessary relation between the two. While it is the case that women are of the female sex, it does not (logically) follow that one need be a woman to be of the female gender (consider cross dressers). ('If you are of the female gender, then you are a woman' is not necessarily true on this account.) That is to say, as in the gender example, the social practices which surround many biological characteristics and occurrences, are only contingently related to them. Hence one might think of an essential - and here I mean 'real' rather than 'necessary' - characteristic of women as sexed independent of discursive practices.

This is one way in which one can think about the idea of the independently 'real'. It is to claim that 'reality' can be both discursively constructed out of socially constructed facts and that some social constructions do reflect a 'reality' independent of the constructions. This invokes the several meanings of 'reality' to which I alluded above.

Tentatively then my move is to align weak pragmatic construction with the descriptive and the normative. On this rendering, 'that men grow hair as a secondary sex characteristic' (Schüssler Fiorenza's example) is descriptive; and this phenomenon occurs regardless of social practice. What people say about this secondary characteristic (that they ought/ought not shave; that it is a sign of manhood; that women should not look like men and therefore remove all facial hair, that it is a secondary sexual characteristic)

becomes normative. The descriptive reflects 'reality' independent of language. Hence weak pragmatic construction seen in terms of the descriptive and the normative both reflects and constructs. Language is confined neither to the domain of completely constituting 'reality', nor completely reflecting 'reality'.

Further, if it can be maintained that the descriptive reflects 'reality' independent of language, this may indicate a place for discovering the raw materials or building blocks of social constructionism in weak pragmatic terms. Instead of thinking of essentialism in normative terms (that since women have this kind of body they should behave in this kind of way: have babies and be carers for instance) which consequently requires the rejection of essentialist assumptions, one could refigure essentialism in terms of the descriptive. An essentialist account would contain only minimal, and perhaps only, (brute) biological description which would not imply any social factors. For example it would contain descriptors like: 'Women have breasts' and 'Women have two ovaries', but it would not be the case that these descriptors imply normative or prescriptive behaviour.

On this account, weak pragmatic constructionism together with the distinction between the descriptive and the normative looks like a possible contender for sorting out the tension between essentialism and social constructionism. But one would have to be prepared to accept the distinction between the descriptive and the normative in the first place, and this would entail accepting the distinction between sex/gender, nature/nurture. As I have interpreted the distinction, theorists like Schüssler Fiorenza who hold that language and 'reality' should not be so conceived, would demur, as would Grosz and Gatens. Interestingly, though, Judith Plaskow employs the distinction and it is also one Schüssler Fiorenza uses in her early work. Plaskow argues:

> Indeed feminist historians have come to recognize that religious, literary, and philosophical works setting forth women's nature or tasks are often prescriptive rather than descriptive of reality. So far from giving the world "as it is," "normative" texts may reflect the tensions within patriarchal culture, seeking to maintain a particular view of the world over against social, political, or religious change.[32]

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[32] Judith Plaskow, "Jewish Memory" in Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (eds.), Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1989)., p. 45.

Speaking about Mishnah[33], Schüssler Fiorenza notes that Jewish historian Jacob Neusner had argued that "Mishnah is not a description of Jewish life, but is prescriptive and imaginative".[34] She endorses this distinction when she later argues "especially normative texts often maintain that something is a historical fact and a given reality although the opposite is the case"[35]. Since In Memory of Her was published in 1983, one can only assume that she has moved from this position, to her more recent view that the natural is a construction of language practice. This is the view that many of our categories and common sense assumptions are already in language.

The alternative to holding the descriptive/normative distinction with its implied acceptance of a 'reality' independent of language, would be to retain the idea of strong pragmatic constructionism with its attendant problems: relativism and the possibility of invalid inference. But need this be the only alternative?

Given these distinctions, let me review the discussion about essentialism and social constructionism. The problem with essentialism is that its adherents posit an unchanging, ahistoric essence. These adherents (for instance Aristotelians like Getrud von le Fort whom Daly cites[36]) assume that there is a necessary connection between woman's essence and her social rôle. Instead of denying that connection, feminists have denied that there is an essence in the first place. Claiming either that women are products of discursive practices which attribute to them a nominal essence, or that women have no essence whatsoever, the tactic of many feminists has been to declare that social constructionism 'makes women'. This has meant that women's experiences can no longer explain what it means to be a woman, for strictly speaking, women do not have experiences; they are their experiences. Women are constructed through their experiences. If women are their experiences, then because all women's experiences are different, all women must be different. If all women are different, then there would seem

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33 Jewish oral Law.

34 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (SCM Press, London, 1983), p. 58.

35 ibid., p.60.

36 See Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex (with a new Feminist Post Christian Introduction by the Author) (Harper & Row, New York, 1975), *passim*, but especially p. 148 ff.

to be nothing which is essential to them which 'makes' them women apart from the multiplicity of experiences, all of which are different.

The claim of feminist theologians is that women's experience is foundational to feminist theologies. If women's experience should be read in the plural ('women's experiences'), the foundation for feminist theologies is women's experiences. If that is the case, then one might posit as many feminist theologies as there are women. Thus one should think of feminist theology as 'feminist theologies'. Just as there are many women's experiences which embody differences between women as well as making them different from men, so one could argue, there will be a plethora of feminist theologies.

Mary Daly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza are two feminist theologians and Luce Irigaray is a feminist theorist all of whom are interested in divinity. The former are united in their condemnation of essentialism and their acceptance of social constructionism. The latter does not explicitly engage in the essentialist issue but both she and Daly supposedly represent essentialist stands in relation to the Divine.

For Daly theology becomes the articulation of women's being as she participates in Be-ing, a form of onto-theology which celebrates what it means to be a woman. For Schüssler Fiorenza, the feminist theological task is to reconstruct the prototypical past of Christian women and radically reinterpret the meanings of woman in terms of class and race as well as gender, all of which are socially constructed. And for Irigaray, the task is to produce a feminine symbolic through women finding their own Divine. For all three, women's experiences remain foundational but are tempered by the emphases each theorist gives to the rôle of language as that which constructs and/or reflects 'reality'. Regardless, Daly, Irigaray and Schüssler Fiorenza give discourse a primary place in the construction of the idea of woman.

However, social constructionism, it turns out, is a complicated notion. Following Grosz's intuition that constructionism needs to be clear about "what are the raw materials of its processes of construction".[37] Using Haslanger's distinction between weak and strong pragmatic constructionism, it transpires that in her terms Schüssler Fiorenza is at least a strong pragmatic constructionist and, along with Daly, looks like also being a weak

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[37] See op. cit., Grosz, Volatile Bodies, p. 213, endnote 20.

pragmatic constructionist. The feminist rejection of essentialism seems then, to be in need of some review.

Now Grosz, as I noted in chapter 1, speaks of, but does not endorse, oppressive practices which arise out of essentialising positions (women's social subordination and secondary place beside men). I agree that such practices are a result of essentialism (biologism, naturalism and universalism), conceived of as arising from a normative context. If articulating positions like these can be shown to be aberrant, shown to be normative rather than descriptive, then it might be possible to retain a notion of essentialism which is descriptive and therefore not pejorative.

In relation to Schüssler Fiorenza's problems with 'the natural', for example, it would appear that on the account I have been developing, 'the natural' is a problem only if one believes two things: that in speaking of 'the natural', one is speaking of 'an independently real world'; and that normative ascriptions which follow from the descriptive are in some way necessary. (That is to say, if one were to agree that all women are of the female sex, then one need not agree that being of the female gender makes one a woman). For argument's sake then, one might argue that independent of discourse, women are of the female sex. That they are of the female gender is a 'result' of complex social practices which allocate rôles and dispositions which women play out.

At this stage, one might think of weak pragmatic constructionism around the idea of 'reality' independent of language and in terms of the distinction between the descriptive and the normative. That gives one a general idea of how one could conceive of Daly's project. It also gives one a way of thinking about de Lauretis' real, as opposed to nominal, essence. What is (real) essence is the domain of the descriptive; what is socially constructed is the domain of the normative (nominal essence). So I tentatively argue for a notion of 'the natural' that does not entail any 'common sense' normative claims. Those normative claims, are always claims about how we think about the world. And how we think about the world leads us to construct the concepts with which we then operate in that world.

The point in recounting this in such great detail is that women's experience is held by feminist theologians to be foundational to feminist theology, as was noted by Valerie Saiving and Judith Plaskow. Feminist theologies, founded on women's experience(s) will reflect a different view of the Divine, for women are different from men (and from each

other). But unless one can sort out what is meant by 'women's experience' it is not possible to say either what the relation of women to the Divine is, or what women might mean by the concept of the Divine/God/G*d. The claims and counter claims of feminist theologians like Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza indicate that social constructionism can be variously interpreted. That being so, it is possible to think of the Divine as not merely a product of social practice, discursively constructed 'all the way down', the stand that Schüssler Fiorenza makes.

However, I have argued that Schüssler Fiorenza's position is ambiguous in terms of its views of 'reality' and that Daly's position is dualistic. I have also offered a model from Sally Haslanger which I have presented as one way of not construing essentialism and social constructionism as either/or stances. I modified Haslanger's qualification of social constructionism even further by making the distinction between the descriptive and the normative. But in the end, this would only beg the question for theorists like Schüssler Fiorenza who would not accept the dichotomous way of thinking in the first place. How can this be resolved?

Questions like: 'Is the relation between physical characteristics/features such as genitals, skin colour, and oppressive structures, arbitrary?' should be answered in the affirmative. 'Yes, the relation is arbitrary. Genitals, skin colour and normative practices are not necessarily linked, even though they are thought to be.' This is not to deny that there is a causal link between genitals and skin colour skin, and oppressive practices. It is instead, to admit that the setting up of oppressive systems is arbitrary (there is, for example, a **perceived** connection between child bearing and nurturing which then binds women to the private sphere; and a perceived connection between being black and having a lower intelligence than one who is white). Once oppressive systems are in place, social practice determines that certain people should be treated in certain kinds of ways. Hence social practice develops a tendency to treat individuals as if there is a social necessity operating to mediate relations between an individual and what she is like and the system in which she exists.[38]

Speaking about characteristics of bodies in this way, however, leaves another major unsettling question. Even if we talk extensively about language practices and what

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[38] I thank Dominic Hyde for his helpful discussions with me on this point.

we 'do' with the descriptive, how is one to spell out the concept of the independent? For what does 'independent of language' mean? Ontologically independent? Conceptually independent? Is there the distinction between the idea of the language dependent and the idea of the language independent that Haslanger has led us to believe? And if there is not, can the distinction between the descriptive and the normative be accepted? What is it to say that there is a 'reality' independent of language which underpins the descriptive?

In a move that signals a change of direction for my discussion of language and 'reality', I suggest that analyses like Haslanger's and mine, although helpful, serve more to separate language and 'reality' independent of language and reinforce their separability, than to explain their perplexing relationship. That is to say, the terms in which Haslanger has set out her analysis of weak pragmatic constructionism, and my distinction between the descriptive and normative are inadequate for an explication of the relation 'independent of' because they impose an implicit dichotomy on language and its supposedly independent partner. This is not to say that Haslanger and I are wrong in arguing as we do. Rather it is to say that what is needed now is an analysis of the relation she intimates, which is not constrained by epistemic factors for the reasons to which Haslanger alluded.[39] My starting point is very different from the analytic stance which informs Haslanger's work.

Rosi Braidotti, alluding to the divergence between "the feminist and the psychoanalytic situations",[40] notes that a stumbling block for the debate in which she is engaged is "how to rethink the body in terms that are neither biological nor sociological".[41] This is analogous to my project here: how to rethink the dichotomising relation between language and 'reality'. Just as Braidotti uses Irigaray's notion of the body to do this re-thinking, so I appeal to Irigaray's idea of the sensible transcendent which directly implicates the body as neither constituted solely by language, nor independent of language. Braidotti comments that "Irigaray's strategy consists in refusing to separate the

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[39] op. cit., Haslanger, "Ontology and Social Construction", pp. 27 - 28.

[40] Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of Ontological difference" in Teresa Brennan (ed.) Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis (Routledge, London & New York, 1989), p. 98.

[41] ibid., pp. 98 & 99.

symbolic, discursive dimension from the empirical, material, or historical one".[42] Underlying Irigaray's refusal of separation, is her conviction that language prefigures what we encounter as bodies, as materiality. So instead of remaining within the Anglo-American analytic tradition, I turn to Irigaray's idea of the sensible transcendent, which I mentioned towards the end of chapter 4. The sensible transcendent is an ideal interpretative device for reading weak pragmatic constructionism. That is because the sensible transcendent transgresses the boundaries between language and 'reality' as they have been articulated so far in Haslanger's and my discussions.

So, in the next section, I propose using the idea of the sensible transcendent (what Irigaray describes as the integration of the immanent and the transcendent), as a way of interpreting language and the idea of 'reality'. This retains their integrity as categories, but insists on their interdependence. The sensible transcendent represents a radical departure from dualistic notions which are set up as oppositional. A discussion of weak pragmatism could be interpreted as persisting with dualistic thinking, on the grounds that a sharp line is drawn between language and what is purportedly independent of language. Haslanger's admission, for example, that "there is no reason to conclude that the world we have a point of view on is likewise socially conditioned" retains this dualistic focus. Perhaps it is not possible to posit the world we have a point of view on unless we assume that it is in some way, likewise socially conditioned. How could we go about explaining this without becoming relativistic and perspectivalist? Ultimately, the idea that there is only language and discursive practice maintained in the interests of those with power is, to paraphrase Haslanger, counter-intuitive. It seems impossible to explain for example malnutrition, hunger and war in such terms.

The sensible transcendent is an example of an alternative way of conceptualising and resolving the problems associated with essentialism, constructionism, 'reality', language and dualism. It neither reduces everything to language/discourse, nor does it rely on dualistic categories for its articulation. While the idea of the sensible transcendent is not a concept found in the analytic discourse I have so far been using, it serves the purpose of crossing the boundaries between the 'analytic' and the 'continental' traditions in philosophy. In this, it is also in keeping with the spirit of Carol Christ's sentiment that

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[42] ibid., p. 99.

feminist theory be 'whole', rather than dualistic. The idea of the sensible transcendent represents a different starting point for discussion of essentialism because it proposes a refiguring of what we might previously have read as oppositional categories. This was the case with de Lauretis' rejection of real, in favour of nominal essence, as that which feminists mean when they talk about essence.

The sensible transcendent also represents a disintegration of the distinction between secular and religious theory. It is a concept that inserts women in the Divine, rather than splitting them from divinity, as man has done with his God, a point which is raised by Penelope Deutscher.[43] This is because the idea of the sensible transcendent explicitly recognises female embodiment (the sensible, the material) as a condition of the transcendent; and language (the transcendent), as a condition of female embodiment (the sensible, the material). I will explain this more as my analysis proceeds. The sensible transcendent repudiates dualistic conceptualisation and is the ground, along with *mimēsis,* upon which Irigaray can be defended against essentialist charges. Concurrently, it provides a way of reading female embodiment which does not fall back on essentialism. And because of this, the Divine becomes interpretable as difference, the Other, the point of wonder.

Weak Pragmatic Constructionism and the Sensible Transcendent

A recurring problem to which I have alluded in this thesis is that of female embodiment. The main problem with essentialism as I have refigured the notion, is not the claim that women are embodied at all (Schüssler Fiorenza's 'natural' category) or that they have ahistorical, immutable timeless essence. What creates the problem is the claim that women's embodiment is thought **necessarily** to engender normative understandings and practices. Using the descriptive/normative distinction as I have outlined it above, it is possible to eliminate that problem but a serious residual worry remains. How is one to characterise the relation that must subsist between the description and what it describes?[44] One way of construing this question is in terms of essence and language:

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[43] op. cit., Deutscher, "The Only Diabolical Thing About Women . . .", p. 94.

[44] I acknowledge the complexity of this question. In philosophical history it has been discussed as a question of representation, of sense data, of realism and anti-realism, of fact and truth and correspondence. Although I have asked the question at this point in my thesis, it would be another

for example, as it is played out in the relation between Daly's social constructionism and the underlying body to which she seems to be committed. In other words, the opposing perspectives, real and nominal essence, might return once more, this time in the form of a dispute about language, conceived of as discursive practice; and what is not language, the so called independently 'real'. It is tempting to read 'language' and 'real' independent of language as a binary opposition, which makes the problem of sorting out the relation between the two enormously difficult. Such a conceptionalisation is bound always to reinforce their separateness. But language and 'reality' need not be conceived of in this oppositional way.

In a glossary note, Grosz argues that Irigaray reclaims "a notion of the body which refuses traditional binary oppositions and places it firmly within a socio-historical context".[45] Grosz argues that for Irigaray:

> . . . not only is subjectivity structured with reference to the symbolic meaning of the body but the body itself is the product and effect of symbolic inscriptions which produce it as a particular, socially appropriate type of body. . . . Dominant systems of discourse and representation are active ingredients of this social inscription of the sexed body. . . . The body is thus the site of the intersection of psychical projections; and of social inscriptions. understood in this way, it can no longer be considered pre- or acultural.[46]

Grosz adds that a reading such as this disallows charges of essentialism to be made against Irigaray. While women are oppressed, it is not their anatomy or physiology, directly, unproblematically that causes this, but "social meaning and value accorded to women's bodies by misogynist culture".[47] In citing Grosz I do not mean to imply here (nor does Grosz) that women's bodies are separable from language. Rather, I want to stress

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thesis altogether if I were to discuss it fully. So what follows is a specific approach which attempts to break down the idea of the language/independent of language dichotomy. For a good discussion of metaphor, realism, science and religion, see Janet Martin Soskice, Metaphor and Religious Language (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992).

[45] Elizabeth Grosz, Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists (Allen & Unwin, St. Leonard's, 1989), p. xv.

[46] ibid.

[47] ibid., p. xx.

the idea that women's bodies are never without social meaning and social value. Their very biology is always **interpreted** biology.

Implicit to this interpretation is the acceptance of discourse and embodiment as interpreted. In effect, the view says that the body is not a 'reality' independent of language. The view promotes the idea that bodies are always already given symbolic meanings, represented in cultural practices, but that one cannot separate the body from its social meanings. This does not mean that language **produces** bodies in the sense that language causes bodies to come into existence. What it does mean is that bodies **as interpreted** depend upon language for their symbolic, hence their social significance. And bodies always have social significance: they are theorised, conceptualized and talked about within a framework which prefigures them as significant. Hence embodiment is always meaning laden. Recall that this was Schüssler Fiorenza's view of sex/gender which seemed to be inconsistent with her claim that 'reality' is open to more or less adequate accounts.

Further, the view does not disallow the possibility of the concepts of anatomy and physiology. Anatomy and physiology, though, are always already interpreted. But, the emphasis is on the interpretation, the attribution of social signification **already** implicit in the interpretation. Language is not **opposed** to an independently real body which it either reflects or constructs. Rather language brings about the conditions in which the body is theorised and understood. Language is the symbolic framework which situates the body as always sexed; and the separability of the body from the symbolic becomes a misleading abstraction.

'Morphology', the "term used by Irigaray to refer to the ways in which the body and anatomy of each sex is lived by the subject and represented in culture"[48] thus provides a reading of 'language' and 'reality' independent of language which denies the 'gap', the dualism apparent in the terminology. On this interpretation, Schüssler Fiorenza's attributing an essentialist stance to Irigaray is misplaced. Both agree that the body is

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[48] ibid., p. xix. See also Luce Irigaray, Speculum Of The Other Woman (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1992), *passim;* Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One (trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke) (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1985), *passim;* Margaret Whitford, Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine (Routledge, London & New York 1991), pp. 58-60 and p. 150.

always already interpreted. But Irigaray does not then argue that there is a 'reality', of any kind, G*d for example, independent of language. Irigaray's idea of embodiment is grounded in both anatomy and physiology, and language already interpreted; but it is not simply a body **or** a complex discursive product. It is discursive **and** it is material.

The notion of the material is an important aspect of Irigaray's schema. 'The material' is presupposed by the idea of morphology. But underlying this use of morphology is Irigaray's notion of the sensible transcendent. The American Irigaray scholar Kathryn Bond Stockton calls Irigaray a "mystic opaque essentialist"(if she can be called an essentialist at all) a "theologian of lack".[49] She maintains that Irigaray deals with the perplexing questions of the material and the mystical. Irigaray, for her, is a "spiritual materialist", someone who "unambiguously exposes how spiritual discourse engenders discourse on materialities that dominant constructions fail to capture".[50] My argument has suggested that Schüssler Fiorenza is a good example of someone who constructs spiritual and materialist discourse as oppositional. The concept of morphology insists that the supposed oppositional and irreducible tension between the material and the transcendent does not exist. Indeed they depend on and reflect each other. Bond Stockton conjectures that Carlyle's 'view of the body as "the mystic unfathomable Visibility" . . . points in two directions simultaneously toward concealment and toward revelation'.[51]

On such an account the body is not transparent, that which language unveils in a complete act of revelation. The body, although visible, is beyond the reach of language because the body is more than the 'simply material'. It is shrouded in the mystery of social signification, wrapped in meanings bestowed by culture. Language, in conferring these meanings, in producing the idea of the body, hides what is already there through previous significations, previous layers of meaning. Hence the body is opaque, it is hidden and the more it is revealed by language, the more language conceals the body. Language, on this

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[49] Kathryn Bond Stockton, God Between Their Lips: Desire Between Women in Irigaray, Brontë and Eliot (Stanford University Press, California, 1994), p. 27.

[50] ibid.

[51] ibid., p. 24.

account, is analogous to the Hebrew God who both reveals and conceals, who is immanent and transcendent.

This is the view of the body in post-structuralist conceptions like Irigaray's. Note that this is a very different view of language from that which I haveappealed to in the early parts of this thesis. The idea of language I have been using, has constituted 'it' as either that which refers, or that which constructs, or both. The emphasis in this kind of conception is on transparency rather than opacity: language makes clear, or articulates facts or states, which reflect a transparent world. For example, in analysing the concept of woman, the function of language is either to identify what the term 'woman' refers to, or to make clear that, and how, the term is socially constructed, or both.

But the present conception suggests the complexity of language: its ability not only to reveal but to conceal. The idea that language might be opaque is implicit. When I argue that language reveals and conceals, I propose that it is within language that one conceives of 'reality' independent of language; and that without language one cannot so conceive. On this view, language does not only reflect and/or construct: language reflects, constructs, reveals and conceals. Language is always already there as a condition of that which is reflected, constructed, revealed and concealed. This conception renders language transcendent, as it implies that language is not only immanent, not just what it presents. Rather language also represents lack, inadequacy, what it cannot do, what it cannot present. In this sense, language is beyond itself, and hidden in the material, in embodiment. There is always more to be revealed and more to be concealed. Mystical overtones like these, reminiscent of the *via negativa,* run through Irigaray's writing, especially when she speaks about human love as transcendent.[52] What I would like to stress in this, is the dawning of the idea that 'language' and 'the body' are interdependent ideas which are not exhausted by each other: they contain their own explicit *jouissance*. The idea of embodiment modifies the idea of language, and the idea of language modifies embodiment.

The move from the analytic idea of language which I have used so far, to this richer concept, represents a shift in ground. It suggests that an implicit presupposition of

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[52] See especially Luce Irigaray, Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (Columbia University Press, New York, 1991); Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference; op. cit., Irigaray "La Mysterique" in op. cit., Speculum Of The Other Woman.

dualism can be avoided in the 'language'/'reality' debate because the relation between 'language' and 'reality' is posed differently and not problematically. But it also means that distinctions I have made like that between the descriptive and the normative will have to be abandoned except for their use in making conceptual distinctions. Such conceptions, in other words, should not be regarded as pointing to an ontological difference between language and 'reality' - to what there is, and what is said about what there is.

Further to this, that language has limits, revealing while concealing, suggests the inadequacy, as well as the potency, of discourse. The concept I have been previously using does not allow for this contingency. This reformulation of the function of language expresses the immanence of the body, while constantly moving the horizon in which the body can be theorised. Yet the transcendence of the body, that which is concealed in language, is hidden in the opacity of discourse. Language, itself transcendent, cannot capture the transcendent because it only barely captures the immanent, 'tumbling' what it fails to entrap, into the "material texture of beauty . . . the fabrication of the transcendent".[53] Indeed, as I just suggested, language itself is viewed as transcendent, reaching beyond itself.

I observed earlier that the sensible transcendent is 'the integration of the immanent and the transcendent'. Language mediates this integration because the imprecision of the idea of the sensible transcendent is borne by the symbolic and its discursive structures. The possibility of a feminine symbolic is, therefore, predicated on the notions of morphology and the sensible transcendent which already embody women symbolically. The strategic use of *mimēsis*, as I argued earlier, is what enables this possibility. According to Irigaray as I noted, mimicry has been assigned to women in the male symbolic. By strategically using *mimēsis*, Irigaray argues, women may be able to develop their own symbolic. Women are symbolised as the immanent (the flesh, the body, the material), and simultaneously as the transcendent, that which the male symbolic cannot symbolise because of the idea of (female) *jouissance* or too muchness. The feminine symbolic would evolve from women's claiming their immanence and their transcendence, strategically, mimetically. In claiming their immanence and their transcendence women 'respond' to the idea of the sensible transcendent. They

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[53] op. cit., Bond Stockton, God Between Their Lips, p. 32.

acknowledge their embodiment and their symbolic construction in a system which is not theirs, but from which they can be liberated by pushing the boundaries which constitute their being.[54]

The imprecision of the idea of the sensible transcendent is already allocated to women in the symbolic.[55] For example, the Pythagorean Table of Opposites which I have used as an example of the symbolic representation of women, allocates imprecision through association with the idea of the female. The female is associated with infinity, motion, plurality and darkness. I suggest that this very imprecision reflects Irigaray's commitment to *mimēsis*. In other words, imprecision mimes the feminine **already** symbolised by the male symbolic.

Margaret Whitford notes that "the sensible transcendent is not a precise concept; it is a condensed way of referring to all the conditions of women's collective access to subjectivity. And so we find that the sensible transcendental is also referred to as *god*".[56] The conjoining of the ideas of imprecision, the sensible transcendent and god is, therefore, quite deliberate. If Irigaray seeks to find a Divine for women, that Divine should have its basis in how women have been symbolised. The Divine for women should mirror women, just as God is the mirror of man: women need a Divine of their own. That is what I argued in chapter 4. The imprecision of the concept of the sensible transcendent mimics the imprecision of women's lives: turning around the overflow, the *jouissance* of the male symbolic. Of all concepts, 'god' is perhaps the most imprecise.[57]

I read Irigaray as holding that the sensible transcendent encompasses and surpasses the materiality[58] of women. For her, the sensible transcendent is possibility for

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54 op. cit., Irigaray, "Volume-Fluidity" in op. cit., Speculum Of The Other Woman, p. 227.

55 ibid., p.229.

56 op. cit., Margaret Whitford, Luce Irigaray Philosophy in the Feminine, p. 47.

57 Notwithstanding Irigaray's discussion of the masculine paternal God in "Plato's Hystera" in op. cit., Speculum Of The Other Woman, p. 322 ff.

58 For discussions of materiality, see: op. cit., Stockton, God Between Their Lips; op. cit., Whitford, Philosophy in the Feminine; Elizabeth Gross, Irigaray and the Divine (Local Consumption Publications, April 1986); Naomi Schor, "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips With Irigaray", Naomi Schor & Elizabeth Weed (eds.), The Essential Difference, Books from Differences Series (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994); Tina Chanter, Ethics of Eros (Routledge, London and New York, 1995).

women, because women need to construct their own symbolic in which their materiality is not read as male lack.[59] What is vital to the understanding of the sensible transcendent however, is that although its meanings might never be transparent, its overall construction suggests Irigaray's refusal of dualism. Neither language nor materiality, in the present case, woman as embodied, should be privileged in the development of a symbolic or of a feminine Divine.

Given Irigaray's refusal of dualism in the idea of the sensible transcendent, I am marking the sensible transcendent as an interpretive focus for weak pragmatic constructionism. If the danger with weak pragmatic constructionism is that it separates the linguistic from the non-linguistic, the sensible transcendent bridges this separation. The concept of the sensible transcendent disavows the idea that there is 'reality' independent of language without asserting that everything is socially constructed all the way down, read in terms of linguistic idealism. The idea of the sensible transcendent relies on more than discourse, yet is not separable from discourse. The idea of the sensible transcendent implies both discourse and the material together, already interpreted and signified. In other words, 'independent of language' does not mean 'ontologically independent'. Instead, it means that what might plausibly be thought of as separable from language (the material), conceptually depends on the transcendence of language. Language in its multifarious functions points to both itself and the material in its immanence, when it reveals; and away from itself in its transcendence, when it conceals. In turn language/discourse requires the sensible - the material - as a condition for its possibility. Because the material is always already interpreted, language is constructed around materiality and materiality is constructed through language. Language and the material are conceptually interdependent.

This means that language and materiality cannot be conceived of, one without the other. The idea that there might be 'reality' independent of language is foreclosed. In other words, this throws out a challenge to Haslanger's claim "that there is no reason to conclude that the world we have a point of view on is likewise socially conditioned".[60] On

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[59] For a discussion of the concept of lack, see op. cit., Deutscher, "The Only Diabolical Thing About Women . . ."; op. cit., Bond Stockton, God Between Their Lips.

[60] op. cit., Hasslanger, "Ontology and Social Construction", p. 34.

the reading of the sensible transcendent which I have just proposed, there can only be the world on which we have a point of view. Language exposes the materiality of that world because without language there can be no concept of the material: the world of necessity is socially conditioned. The epistemic conditions for theorising what is real, properly rejected by Haslanger, are replaced by conceptual conditions arising from the transcendence of language.

The body, as material, is retained and should not be reduced to a construction of language practice an ideal, linguistic entity. The material cannot be reduced to a construction of language practice, because without the material, language cannot function and the material cannot be. Bond Stockton points out that French philosopher Roland Barthes had distinguished between those who "posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history" (constructionists) and those who "posit a reality which is *ultimately* impenetrable, irreducible" (essentialists).[61] The transcendence of language suggests that 'reality' is both permeable to history and ultimately impenetrable, irreducible. What is permeable can be termed 'sensible', what would be ultimately impenetrable can be termed 'transcendent'. And language moves between the impenetrability of itself and the material, at times transparent and at other times, opaque.

The ideas of the sensible transcendent and morphology express a different relation - neither total reflection nor total construction - between 'language' and 'reality'. Since the body, for instance, is already symbolised as material and cultural, its 'reality' is seen as mediated from the first by language, the symbolic.

The idea of the sensible transcendent embodies the opposing tensions of dualism: adequacy/inadequacy; language/'reality'; the material/the spiritual. The idea of the sensible transcendent allows the concurrent concepts of the material's structuring language and language's structuring the material. The sensible transcendent mediates the ideas of language and 'reality'. Hence Irigaray's concept of the sensible transcendent is an example of one way which might resolve problems with essentialism, social constructionism, dualism 'the real' and 'language'. My appeal to Irigaray's work is in terms of her insistence that dualism can be blocked at the outset, that one need not contemplate **some** distinctions in ways that separate ontologically. The sensible

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[61] op. cit., Bond Stockton, God Between Their Lips, p. 14.

transcendent does this work for Irigaray. It also inserts the idea of the Divine immediately into the conceptual framework, because divinity is not conceived as it has been traditionally: male, transcendent, omniscient, omnipotent.

But it is important to realise that the idea of a feminine symbolic must be excluded from the project of denying ontological separability. Remember that Irigaray is arguing for an ontologically separate feminine symbolic. For her, since women have been conceived in lack, as the negative Other to men, it is vitally important that women make their own symbolic, and their own feminine. The idea of the sensible transcendent therefore becomes an idea peculiar to the possibility of a feminine genre. Paradoxically, sexual specificity must be employed, through *mimēsis*, in acknowledging the sensible transcendent. Women's materiality, reconceptualised under their own (potential) gaze and within their own (potential) discourse, is a requirement of the elaboration of the sensible transcendent. Again, I stress the importance of *mimēsis* in the process.

The idea of the sensible transcendent also does the work that Carol Christ wanted of a feminist theology in terms of eroding dualistic structures and concepts which permeate theological conceptions of the Divine, to which I referred in my Introduction. Recall as well that I pointed out that Carol Christ believes "women's spiritual and social quests are two dimensions of a single struggle . . .[62] The sensible transcendent satisfies Christ's desire to dispense with dualism because it represents the denial of ontological separability between language and 'reality'.

Hence, by reading weak pragmatism in the light of the sensible transcendent as I have done, we can see why Bond Stockton refers to Irigaray as an opaque essentialist. Irigaray acknowledges the importance of the material and simultaneously, rejects the transparency of discourse. This does not concede Schüssler Fiorenza's point against Irigaray. What it means is that essentialism, initially refigured in terms of the descriptive and then modified; and weak social constructionism, read through the sensible transcendent, reinforces the idea that everything is constructed "all the way down". This view neither promotes linguistic monism, nor dualism. The material and language are read as interactive and interdependent aspects in the conceptualising of women.

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[62] Carol P. Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest, (Beacon Press, Boston, 1980), pp. 8 & 9.

Considering this approach, how are we to understand women's experience and the Divine?

Encore: Women's Experience

I argued that Mary Daly can be considered within a dualistic framework because she seems to posit an independently 'real' body which underpins her ontological-linguistic strategy. It is arguable, however, that there are strong similarities between Daly's position and Irigaray's in terms of their implicit, albeit different, theorising of embodiment. Further, Deutscher remarks that "Irigaray affirms the notion of the infinite as always in a state of becoming."[63] In this way, with the emphasis on 'becoming', Daly and Irigaray are also analogous. A persistent use of metaphor by both theorists pushes the similarities even further. Even the mocking tone, the irony of their work bears some comparison. What delineates their positions perhaps, is Irigaray's insistence that women need to develop their own symbolic, their own Divine. My interpretations have suggested however, that Daly's project is in keeping with this declaration of Irigaray's even if the origins and outcomes appear dissimilar.

But in terms of the Divine project itself, Daly's work, like Schüssler Fiorenza's is retrospective. It is in the history of women that one can uncover the authenticity of being a woman. Retracing and reconstructing women's past, appealing to bygone halcyon days, informs the work of both Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza. In this way, their work is situated in a nostalgia for the possibilities expressed in women's histories.[64] Irigaray's references to Greek mythology do not have the hallmarks of historical reclamation. Rather, the stories provide a psychic moral for women: Aphrodite, for example, is cast by Irigaray as a Goddess who "holds a special place between nature, gods and human manifestation. She represents the embodiment of love . . ."[65]

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63 op. cit., Deutscher, "The Only Diabolical Thing About Women . . .", p. 102.

64 I refer in particular to Schüssler Fiorenza's reconstruction of Christian women's origins in op. cit., Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, and the implicit message in Mary Daly, in cahoots with Jane Caputi, Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language (Beacon Press, Boston, 1987).

65 See, Luce Irigaray, Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution (trans. Karin Montin) (Routledge, New York, 1994), p. 94.

Lastly, the rôle Schüssler Fiorenza attributes to a community of believers lies outside the obvious concerns of Irigaray and Daly. For Schüssler Fiorenza, there is an over-riding socio-political moral obligation towards justice and equality. Through such a commitment emerges the idea of the Divine, G*d. The site of the Divine is thus the *polis*, not the symbolic, as it is for Irigaray, or ontological-linguistics as it is for Daly. This is not to say that justice and equality are not concerns of Daly or Irigaray. Rather, their starting points are different. Regardless, for each theorist the idea of the Divine is projected by language which reflects their individual interests and commitments.

I have now established that there is an intimate connection between language and women's experiences. Daly, Schüssler Fiorenza and Irigaray are all convinced of the importance of language in relation to articulating both women's experiences and the Divine. Having argued the connections between language and experience and having refigured a concept of essentialism not dependent upon the normative, what remains is to draw out the connections between women's experience(s) and the Divine.

Initially, I highlighted the claim that women's experience is foundational to feminist theologies. In developing the concept of women's experience, what became evident was that 'women's experience' should be read in the plural ('women's experiences') and that this plurality relied on the idea that women did not share a common essence which made them women. Indeed, the lack of a common essence suggested that women's experience should not be reified. Experience(s) constitute women and should not be interpreted as that which is constituted by women.

An elaboration of the idea of social constructionism led to a modification of this position. I argued that weak pragmatic constructionism, interpreted through the concept of the sensible transcendent, is a view which gives the body a place as the material of social constructionism. Underlying this argument, was the assumption that women's experiences should both explain and be an explanation of the idea 'women'.

As a basis for feminist theologies, women's experiences offer an alternative vision to men's because of the manner in which language and socio-political practice play themselves out. The ideas of the material and language inform the idea 'woman'. Language, conceived of as transcendent, together with the female body as always already interpreted, suggest women's difference from men. Women are always already interpreted **as women** because their materiality is always already depicted as 'real'. A

feminine Divine would therefore mirror women's materiality - their sexed bodies - as well as their cultural origins in language. I argued in my Introductory chapter that if women's experiences constitute women, and if the Divine should mirror women in feminist theologies as it has men in men's theology, then since women are socially constructed, so the Divine mirrors that constructedness. This position should however, be modified in light of the idea of the sensible transcendent.

I have argued that the material and language are not separable and that the idea of woman cannot be simply either the idea of the material (female body) or discursive (social construction of gender). It must be always already both. The idea of women's experiences, acknowledged in its multiplicity, is the idea of both that which constructs, and that which is constructed. The body and discourse symbolically construct, and are constructed by, each other. Hence if women's experiences are to inform feminist theologies, they must do so on the basis of both the material and the discursive, the constructed and that which constructs. On this reading, the Divine is socially constructed in virtue of its being the mirror of women, thought of as both embodied and discursively constituted. This, in effect, means that the concept of difference is implicit in the idea of women: not only are women's bodies different from each other, they are differently constituted, represented and interpreted across cultures, across racial and class contexts.

I noted that Schüssler Fiorenza's argument denied that there was any basis upon which one could speak of women as women, because the very idea of sex/gender is a socio-political construction. Daly and Irigaray, I suggested, can be read as arguing that one can speak of women as women: that sex/gender is the primary significatory category for articulating the idea of 'woman'. For them, what I have now called women's materiality - female embodiment - is a condition of their being women. But this apparently apolitical stance needs to be interpreted on different levels.

My current discussion suggests that as always already interpreted, women's bodies do not have biological essence in the ways which I outlined at the beginning of this thesis: the timeless, unchanging, ahistorical, from which normative or prescriptive dictates supposedly follow. Rather, the idea of embodiment is opaque, revealed and concealed in language, which is itself always socio-political. Women are women on account of their materiality, but not only women on account of their materiality. Their cultural interpretations ensure their differences amongst and between each other, in terms of

class and race for example. But the common bond of women remains their sexed/gendered female embodiment, even if that is figured and interpreted differently in different cultures. Thus culture, socio-politics, expressed in discursive practices, shares with female embodiment, the constitution of women.

Schüssler Fiorenza's rejection of Daly and Irigaray is based upon their use of language which she regards as revalorising essentialist feminist notions. The introduction of the concept of the sensible transcendent signals an alternative reading of such usage. Instead of figuring sex/gender as irredeemably essentialist, the body becomes the already interpreted material of language, the co-requisite for discursive practices. Ontologically, the body cannot be a 'reality' independent of discourse. Discourse requires the body, just as the body requires discourse, as I have been arguing.

This means that one could speak of women as women because women's bodies always inform and are a condition of, the articulation of 'woman'. But this does not mean that women's bodies always are, or must be, interpreted, signified and represented in the same ways across cultures, classes and racial groups. That bodies are always already interpreted does not mean that embodiment should be understood as only discursively constructed. In short, it means that women's materiality, their embodiment, is always interpreted differently. Thus women are different, and essentially so. But, as I argued earlier, bodies resist language because language with respect to bodies, is not a closed system. Language can never completely reveal: language conceals also. Language is multi-layered and multi-functional, an infinity of possibilities which discloses itself and the material, while simultaneously enforcing closure and silence on itself and the material. That bodies are always already interpreted, points to their resistance of ultimate truth claims: where there is revelation or disclosure, there is also concealment and closure.

Women's experiences, on this basis, are neither **completely** socially constructed nor determined by a body about which normative claims should be made. The claim that women's experiences are foundational to feminist theologies, feminist theorising about the Divine, can be understood as a coherent position for women to adopt, especially in light of the projection theory it employs. Recall Nancy Frankenberry's reference to the "conspicuous reliance of many feminist critiques in Feuerbachian projection theories" which I noted in my Introductory chapter. As I have already indicated, Irigaray is explicit in her acknowledgement of Feuerbach, in her idea that women need their own divinity,

just as men have their own. My discussion of Feuerbach in chapter 4 elaborated the idea of God as the mirror of Man. There, I argued that Irigaray claims that women need their own Divine just as men have theirs.

The concept of the Divine/the Goddess/G*d as mirror of women and wo/men is implicit, but its Feuerbachian source is unacknowledged, in Daly's and Schüssler Fiorenza's works. Either way, the implication of insisting that women's experience(s) should be used as the foundation for feminist theologies, is that the concept of the Divine is embedded in, and projected from, women's experiences. The Divine is the mirror of women because women project the Divine. And for Schüssler Fiorenza, the Ekklesia is the projection of G*d.

As I have described her project, Irigaray's intuition that women need a Divine of their own, requires that the idea of women's experiences be elaborated in terms both material and linguistic/discursive. The Divine, on such an account, is both material and linguistic/discursive. The idea of the sensible transcendent is constituted by the polarising tensions between the material and the spiritual. On this account the Divine, god, is integrated in the immanent and the transcendent, holding both together, yet apart. Here, Irigaray's notion of the Divine mimics the masculine paternal God's dual 'nature' - transcendent and immanent - while subverting the idea of the Divine's embodiment in the man Jesus. What counts for Irigaray is female embodiment as the locus of a feminine Divine.

I have been developing an argument which proposes that the idea of women's experiences points to the transcendence of language and the material. Neither language nor the material completely captures, or is captured by, the Other. Yet they remain interdependent because in their interdependence the very possibility of the material and language are realised.

Remember that one of my concerns about Schüssler Fiorenza's project to denaturalise sex/gender, was that it implied an ambiguous understanding of 'reality'. G*d remains independent of language, yet is the mirror of the ekklesia. That is to say, I suggested that G*d is a social construction, while I also acknowledged that according to Schüssler Fiorenza, G*d is independent of language because talk of G*d is necessarily analogical. The notion 'G*d' would, however, still depend for its elaboration upon the ekklesia in which it is articulated. G*d becomes a projection of the ekklesia: rather than

G*d being the mirror of Man, to recall the Feuerbachian terminology, G*d is the mirror of the ekklesia whose members are wo/men. The notion 'G*d' is relational on this reading, because it would emanate from the just and equitable relations forming the ekklesia and enunciated in its socio-political discourse. In other words, the possibility of construing G*d as a 'reality' independent of language, is disallowed: nothing can be independent of language.

My account of Irigaray's sensible transcendent is able to embrace the difficulty of an objectively 'real' G*d beside a projected G*d. As I have argued the case, the female body is the 'raw material' out of which the Divine emerges. When women project the Divine, they project not only language, but language situated in their embodiment, and their embodiment situated in language. But it is not a 'pure', a 'brute', female body, nor 'pure', 'brute', language. It is a body already culturally interpreted and which embodies difference. Certainly the idea of the Divine is dependent on discourse, but not dependent on discourse alone. Language and the material, intersecting in the sensible transcendent, constitute the projection which is the Divine: divinity is both material and discursive, immanent and transcendent. This allows for the possibility of analogical and metaphorical language, poetics. The Divine, on this account, is intrinsically mystery, while simultaneously Utopian, the possibility of a feminine ideal. But, there is no 'brute' divinity, no G*d independent of discourse, just as there is no 'brute' biology.

My proposal is that the idea of the sensible transcendent gives us a way of thinking about social constructionism in relation to women and also in relation to the Divine. Social constructionism is grounded in both the material (female embodiment) and language (discursive practice). As the mirror of women, the Divine is also grounded in the material and language. On this account women's experiences are necessarily implicated in feminist theologies and elucidations of the Divine.

I remarked earlier that Whitford and Deutscher have noted the multiplicity of meanings for the 'Divine' in Irigaray's work. The Divine is the projection of an ideal for women, the point at which lovers meet, the sensible transcendent. Hence the Divine is always here and always beyond. The Divine is lack and the Divine is concealment. These formulations of the Divine for women invite multiplicity, mimicking the symbolism of the

Pythagorean Table of Opposites.[66] Women may mimic their multiplicity, but in so doing, they project the complexity of the Divine.

If the primary reason for Schüssler Fiorenza's rejection of the 'natural' is that she perceives a necessary link between what I have called the descriptive and the normative, then to disavow that link, is to remove the reason for its rejection. In its place, the sensible transcendent, subtending morphology, reinscribes the body as the material condition for discourse, and discourse as the condition of the possibility for the material. 'Women's experiences' can be thought of as the way in which culture circumscribes women's lived experiences through its inscription and interpretation of women's bodies. Hence women's experiences are both material (reliant on their sexed/gendered embodiment) and discursive (reliant on language). Women's experiences are **of** their bodies and **in** their bodies, always already interpreted. The sensible transcendent situates a woman in her body, while discourse removes her beyond her body into language and beyond language, illustrating her lack, her need of divinity.

The idea of the Divine is deliberately ambiguous: that towards which women set themselves, an ideal of transcendence; the point of contact between two lovers where the 'not' they are, is expressed; the ground for the development of a feminine symbolic; the sensible transcendent, the meeting of the material, language and its beyond.[67] Consider Bond Stockton's rendering of Irigaray's Divine, her 'God':

> 'God', in Irigaray's theories, plays a vital role . . . God . . . is figured as the material resistance of women's bodies to the cultural constructions that have barred women's pleasure. More daring yet, because Irigaray locates this material resistance (this opacity) in 'women's' hole (where she is said to lack), 'God', not 'woman' is a crack, a gap. a lack - the fracture we need for conceiving new pleasures. . . . 'God' also figures the body of a lover who, while coming close to 'woman' nurtures the fracture that keeps "him" from possessing "her" . . .[68]

The relation between women's experiences and the Divine can therefore be spelt out in terms of women's self-understandings as embodied and beyond their bodies.

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[66] See chapter 1 of this thesis.

[67] See op. cit., Whitford, Philosophy in the Feminine; op. cit., Deutscher, "The Only Diabolical Thing About Women. . ."; and op. cit., Stockton, God Between Their Lips.

[68] op. cit., Stockton, God Between Their Lips, p. 50.

Women's experiences should be thought of as foundational to feminist theologies on this reading, because the Divine which is 'captured' by feminist theologies is the mirror of women. I am arguing for a concept of divinity which manifests women's differences, women's complexities, women's urges towards transcendence and which emerges from women's experiences, constantly elusive in its materiality, yet always already interpreted in its becoming. Women's bodies: black, yellow, poor, rich, lesbian, straight, project the Divine: the Divine is the mirror of women. Irigaray's *mimētic* strategy is the key to a feminine divinity.

One of Schüssler Fiorenza's underlying aims was, as I pointed out in chapter 3, to accentuate the instability of the term 'G*d'. I argued there that the sign 'G*d' is meant to convey this instability. Considering the tradition in which she situates herself and her on-going, deliberate use of Christian sources, it is difficult to ignore its patriarchal (kyriarchal) overtones. Daly's emphasis on the Goddess as the verb of verbs, and the becoming of women in their differences, resists this paternalism, although her 'debt' to onto-theology is great. Irigaray's conscientious dialogue with the male symbolic in search of a feminine symbolic relies on exploiting male representations of women's bodies. In this her Divine is defiant, challenging the dominance of the masculine paternal God (G*d). If women are to use their own experiences as a foundation for feminist theologies, then women may indeed find their own Divine.

Irigaray and Hampson, as I indicated in my Introductory chapter, had implied that there is some peculiarity in associating ideas about women's experiences which are constructed almost totally in sociological terms, with formulations of the Divine. As my work has evolved, it has become clear that the ideas of essentialism and social constructionism can be refigured in terms which do not render them oppositional, thus taking the edge off this peculiarity. In exploring feminist theologies, I have interrogated some feminist theologians' unquestioning acceptance of social constructionist theory. The result of that interrogation has been the development of a concept of the Divine which depends upon acceptance of social constructionist theory modified in terms of the sensible transcendent. As refigured, the idea of the Divine incorporates difference and plurality, embodiment and discourse, the transcendent and the immanent.

The resolution of the essentialist /social constructionist debate in relation to women's experiences and female embodiment, provides insights into the problem of how

one is to construe the relation between women's experiences and the feminine Divine. I have developed a strong thesis which maintains that the Divine is the mirror of women and as such, necessarily mirrors women's materiality, notably their female embodiment. But as I pointed out, 'women's embodiment' is not a 'pure' concept, but always already interpreted by and through language. Hence the feminine Divine as the mirror of women mirrors the 'fact' that women are socially constructed.

As the mirror of women, the Divine is not disconnected from women's everyday lived experiences. The Divine mirrors class, race and sex/gender differences with which feminist theory has grappled. The Divine signifies and embodies difference.

CONCLUSION

The dominant concern of some feminist theologians has been to include women's experiences as part of the conceptualising of the Divine in feminist theologies. I have argued that the ideas of essentialism and social constructionism are complex and can be construed as dependent upon dualistic conceptions like nature and nurture, reality and language. In this sense the argument has attempted to elucidate the feminist commitment to fracturing dualism in feminist theologies.

My view is that feminist theologies are concerned with two inter-related matters: re-figuring the idea of divinity, and inscribing feminist theologies as explicitly political. The work of Daly, Schüssler Fiorenza and Irigaray typifies this twin engagement, as I have shown. They are all committed to explicating the idea that women are socially constructed. Each theorist acknowledges the fundamental importance of discourse in the process, and each theorist denies that one should think of women in a (real) essentialist manner which disavows the rôle of cultural factors in 'making' women. Hence, each theorist affirms the adage that women are made and not born. Daly also denounces nominalism, and Schüssler Fiorenza denounces the idea of nominal essence because she believes that subscribing to any essence, revalorises concepts we take to be natural and commonsense, such as sex/gender. In doing this, they fail to realise that social constructionist theory, which they uncritically deploy, owes its origins to the work of John Locke. His distinction between real and nominal essence has provided to feminists the inspiration for an analysis of the idea of woman in terms of discursive practice. Feminist theologians, using the distinction between real essence and discursive practice which constitutes women as subjects, have challenged the essentialist paradigm. However, as I have argued, they revalorise its implicit oppositional nature and therefore remain within the paradigm. I have also argued that Irigaray does not work within the essentialist paradigm, refusing its theoretical formulating from the beginning and stressing instead the conceptual and ontological inter-relatedness of language and the material.

Mary Daly refutes the idea that there is a universal, ahistorical, atemporal essence which all women share and which makes all women basically the same. We saw in chapter 2 that Daly extensively criticises the concept of the essential woman, which she

calls the Eternal Feminine. Daly's contention is that if women are the same, it is language practice and culture which render them so. Daly seems to assume that women are basically the same, that one could speak of 'women as women' without countenancing other social factors like race and class, contrary to Spelman's concerns raised in chapter 1. I have argued that this is not the case. Daly alleges that by transforming discursive practices, one's ontology and one's ontological commitments will also change. So for Daly, the site of radical metamorphosis is discourse. Women must interrogate and abandon androcentric discursive practices and begin naming for themselves. From and through new naming, will emerge the Goddess, the Verb of Verbs. Daly's comprehensive deployment of metaphor insinuates meanings which enable her to capture the elusiveness of the Divine, the Goddess, which can never be captured by noun naming.

Schüssler Fiorenza also refutes the idea that there is a universal, ahistorical, atemporal essence which all women share, and which make women the same across class and race boundaries. Hence, for Schüssler Fiorenza, one can never speak of women as women: wo/men are different from each other. Yet even on Schüssler Fiorenza's account one can speak of wo/men's experiences as a foundation to feminist theologies, because wo/men have been, and continue to be, oppressed. Further, Schüssler Fiorenza thinks that there is no reality which language reflects, that our concepts of truth, reality, gender and class, for example, are socially constructed. Socio-political discourse is responsible for producing all kinds of ideas which we have assumed to be natural. Race, gender and class, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, are not 'natural' at all. The language in which we talk about these ideas constructs, rather than reflects.

We saw, however, that Schüssler Fiorenza thinks that although discourse is the site of oppression, this is not because 'it' is gendered. Rather, discourse oppresses because of the naturalising assumptions which underpin its use. In 'naturalising', as Schüssler Fiorenza employs the term, we take certain concepts to be commonsense and given, revealing that we actually think of them in essentialist ways. One is in constant danger of revalorising the concepts and conceptual frameworks in which one operates, thinking for example in terms of what she calls the logic of identity which assumes the superiority of Euro-centric culture.

In a bold move, Irigaray adopts a mimetic strategy which concedes that discourse, indeed the whole of the symbolic, is gendered and which sets out to destabilise the supposed neutrality of the symbolic. Hence, Irigaray is also concerned with language, the production of women and the conceptual terminology which binds them. Her constant references to the trope of female embodiment read either literally, mimetically, or metaphorically impose the judgement, however, that she is essentialist. I have suggested that she neither has a dualistic ontological-linguistic strategy which assumes an independently real female body, as does Daly, nor does she appear to believe, like Schüssler Fiorenza does, that discursive practices in terms of socio-politics uniquely construct reality.

In reading these theorists closely, I have maintained that their arguments share common origins with the discussions of other theorists. The work of de Lauretis, Fuss and Spelman explores the essentialist debate expanding its horizons and questioning some of its assumptions. Spelman, for example, argues that sex/gender is an oppressive category amongst race. On my reading, there is a strong connection between the concerns of secular theorists and those interested in interrogating the idea of divinity.

In spite of the differences between Daly, Schüssler Fiorenza, and Irigaray, the details of their arguments show that each theorist has an abiding interest in the relation between women and the Divine. Throughout this thesis I have claimed that for feminists interested in the Divine, the nature of this relationship can be settled only if a satisfactory understanding of 'woman' can be achieved. Overwhelmingly, social constructionism has gained ascendancy as the explanation for 'woman', but how it is to be understood needs careful consideration. What seems certain is that Daly, Schüssler Fiorenza and Irigaray are each committed to some version of Feuerbachian projection theory, which holds that the Divine is constructed in terms of idealised and Utopian projection theory.

I argued that Daly retains a dualistic metaphysic because of the primacy she gives to language, while she simultaneously assumes the existence of an independently real female body. Discursive practices of women are what constitutes their Ultimate Being, hence their association with the Goddess. By contrast, Schüssler Fiorenza scorns the idea of 'reality' independent of language, while simultaneously implying that language has access to what appears to be some 'reality' independent of language. G*d, for her,

remains a 'reality' independent of language. Her renunciation of psychoanalytic theory which, she maintains, revalorises the maternal feminine, is based upon her distrust of a totalising logic of the Same or logic of identity. Irigaray also denounces the logic of the Same and holds that the ideas of woman and Divinity are conceived within language. However, because she does not work within the essentialist paradigm, there is no question of her maintaining an idea of 'reality' independent of language.

Regardless, both Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza have a commitment to social constructionism. They appeal to this theoretical category in terms of seeing it as a solution to the problems of essentialism. One of the problems of essentialist/constructionist debate is how to theorise the female body without deferring to essentialist notions. So, I have argued, what is missing from both of their theories is an account of how embodiment should be theorised in relation to the divine.

In my concluding chapter, I argued that Irigaray's sensible transcendent represents a way of theorising the language/body dilemma that is not offered by either Daly or Schüssler Fiorenza. I argued that because of this, a Divine that might be envisioned as the feminine Divine, embraces the categories of language dependence and the independently 'real'.

Irigaray's sensible transcendent posits the body and discourse, but privileges neither. The body and discourse are mutually interdependent. Lastly, I argued that Irigaray's conception of the sensible transcendent allows for 'women's experience' to be both *explanans* and *explanandum*. I accept Scott's analysis that it is experience which needs to be explained, but I also argued that sometimes experience can be an explanation. Thus, when one sets out to articulate 'women' and 'women's experience' one should immediately recognise the ambiguity of the term, not just as Spelman acknowledged it, but in both a materialist and a linguistic sense. What is important here is that language, and 'reality' independent of language, collapse as ontologically separable categories: they are **interdependent**. On this reading, Schüssler Fiorenza's claim that language never mirrors reality, but only constructs it, should be reassessed.

The idea of sensible transcendent embodies two apparently oppositional categories, the body and language. Irigaray's argument that women need a Divine of their own, needs to be read as a suggestion that the term 'woman' is ambiguous, invoking both

the linguistic and the material. The construction of a feminine divinity would, therefore, incorporate the idea that women are materially and discursively produced.

The overall argument of this thesis suggests the potentially radical nature of feminist theologies within secular, as well as religious, contexts - feminist theologies' 'double dare'. If feminist theologies are to be thought of as theological both in terms of refiguring concepts of divinity; and political, in terms of incorporating categories like class, race, and gender, then their critical, deconstructive nature needs to be highlighted. While the theological-political context of feminist theologies is not a new idea in relation to theologies generally, the feminist challenge to theorising the Divine from the perspective of sectional interests, which include and emphasise sex/gender, is particularly subversive.

Irigaray's concept of the sensible transcendent offers one way of interpreting this 'double dare' present in the feminist theologies of Daly and Schüssler Fiorenza. The articulation of theology and politics, language and reality, which does not make them the Same, but which recognises their theoretical separability, is a significant moment for feminist theories. This is especially important in trying to come to terms with the idea of social constructionism. Theoretically, language and reality seems always to be in tension with each other. The idea of the sensible transcendent does not resolve this tension. Rather, the sensible transcendent embraces this tension, working with *mimēsis* to articulate a possible feminine divinity and a possible feminine symbolic. Through this might emerge women as ontologically distinct.

It is worth remarking that the feminist dependence on Feuerbachian projection theory which has emerged in Daly's, Schüssler Fiorenza's and Irigaray's work makes women guarantor of the Divine. I noted that Deutscher argued that God is man's guarantor even if man is 'severed' from the Divine.[1] Women however, are the would-be guarantors of the Divine precisely because they would not be severed from a divinity which embodies the sensible transcendent. *Mimēsis* ensures not only the ontological distinguishability of women, but identifies women with their own symbolic structures of which a feminine divine is the foundation.

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[1] See footnote 52, Chapter 4.

It is in this sense that the Divine is in language. Language, which I argued reveals and conceals as well as reflects and constructs, operates in much the same way as Hebrew conceptions of the Divine. The revelatory and concealing dispositions of the Divine manifest God's immanence and transcendence, just as language operates to mediate and constitute the sensible transcendent.

What is clear in this conceptualisation, is that the proclivity of Feuerbach to situate God in human consciousness is consistent with Irigaray's belief that everything is already in language. But the idea that everything is already in language does not set boundaries which are fixed and determined. On the contrary, the very concept that language itself, as part of a symbolic system, creates its own overflow, provides for the possibility of constant movement towards, and beyond, pre-existing boundaries, the possibility of endless becoming. Schüssler Fiorenza's impulse to situate G*d as 'real' outside language, is driven, I think, by her unarticulated assumption that language is finite. Contrary to Schüssler Fiorenza's perspective, and in keeping with Irigaray's intuition, G*d cannot be independent of language, for the idea of such a 'reality' would be vacuous. On Irigaray's view, only within language can we conceive of anything.

The task is now to develop ways in which a feminine symbolic - or feminine symbolics - might proceed. The use of *mimēsis* is a starting point which plays on the entrenched male metaphors expressed in, for example, the Pythagorean Table of Opposites. *Mimēsis* itself is necessarily political, as this study has shown. The risk of essentialism should be taken seriously as Teresa de Lauretis pointed out. What women need to decide is how to work best amongst themselves, for themselves, to promote their own divinity, their own ontological separability, their own politics of difference. This will not be an easy task. Recognition of women's entrapment in an atrophying system which denies their difference(s) and promotes their (apparent) sameness, is primary. On that, Daly, Schüssler Fiorenza and Irigaray agree. It is the responsibility of feminist theologies to promote that awareness and develop political strategies for change.

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